THE PREY OF THE GODS

BY FLORENCE MARRYAT

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Florence Marryat (1834-), the daughter of Captain Marryat, was born at Brighton. She wrote Her Lord and Master. Her novel was published in 1871.

THE PREY OF THE GODS.

A Novel.

BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT,

[MRS ROSS CHURCH,]

AUTHOR OF "LOVE'S CONFLICT," "VERONIQUE," "HER LORD AND MASTER," ETC. ETC.

"Where, when the Gods would be cruel,
Do they go for a torture?—where
Plant thorns, set pain like a jewel?
Ah! not in the flesh, not there!
The rocks of the earth, and the rods
Are weak as foam on the sands;
In the heart is the prey of the Gods,
Who crucify hearts—not hands."

A. C. SWINBURNE.

"If the sense is hard
To alien ears, I did not speak to these.
No, not to thee, but to thyself in me."

TENNYSON.

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THE PREY OF THE GODS.

CHAPTER I.

COMING EVENTS.

It is generally acknowledged that of all the tasks society imposes on us, the effort to amuse a party of dinner guests, when their powers of mastication are no longer put in requisition, is the one least likely to meet with success.

And if this is the case in town, where the latest criticism, literary, artistic, or political, the best authenticated scandal, and the freshest *bon-mot* from the clubs, pass readily from mouth to mouth, how much more so must it be in the country, when, the contents of the daily papers being exhausted, and the prospect of the hunting or shooting season discussed, nothing remains but the state of the eternal crops to afford mental sustenance to those who have left their lower organs nothing more to do.

Certainly the bored and languid expression on the faces of the dozen or more men and women, guests of Sir Lyster and Lady Gwynne, who are scattered about the drawing-room of Felton Hall, on the sultry August evening on which this story opens, does not seem as though it contradicted the assertion.

Sir Lyster himself, with the characteristic British obstinacy that will not conceive a grate without a fire, is standing on the hearth-rug with his hands beneath his coat-tails, carefully airing his nether garments before a heap of white and gold shavings whilst he lays down the law on the subject now

under discussion, with that assumption of complete and unanswerable knowledge, which is the usual index to a mind inconceivably ignorant and brutishly dull; and his appearance bears out the character suggested by his demeanour. Of middle age and height, with grizzled curly hair, and a pair of whiskers of the regular old-fashioned "mutton chop" style, the secret conveyed by his sensual mouth and heavy chin is passed over by such as are not keen observers of the outward signs of inward nature, in favour of the wide open, round, blue eyes which have usually a twinkle in them, and are always bright and clear.

Self-seeking, and the amiability which follows success in the pursuit of pleasure, are stamped on every feature of his florid countenance; but yet there are many people (chiefly women) to be found who, on the strength of his eyes, are ready to affirm that Sir Lyster Gwynne is the most good-tempered of men, and that no one who looked at him could doubt it for a moment.

But then the same individuals are quite as ready to take their oaths of the indisputable happiness of Lady Gwynne.

There is a pause in the baronet's noisy declamation: a pause during which he looks triumphantly at his neighbours, and imagines that the politeness that keeps them silent is the effect of his own unanswerable argument; and for the first time since he commenced to talk, the voice of another is permitted to be audible.

"Any truth in presentiments? *Je m'en doute.* Do you believe in them yourself, Lady Gwynne?"

She is sitting on a sofa at some distance from her husband, the centre of a group of young people of both sexes, and as the question is addressed to her she raises her face towards the speaker.

A fair face, certainly; fair, and pale, and delicate, with no especial beauty except such as is conveyed by earnest eyes and a tremulous, sensitive mouth; but with *that* stamped on it, which, were the features the most perfect in the world, would draw away the attention of the beholder to be riveted upon itself, and that is her expression. For when not engrossed by any topic of immediate interest, there is a vague, yearning look upon the face of Lady Gwynne, which tells of a desire that, consciously or unconsciously to herself, has never yet

been satisfied. And the unsuccessful search has drawn premature lines about her eyes and forehead, and caused the corners of her mouth to droop too much for that of a happy and contented woman of five-and-twenty.

"Believe in presentiments, Major Calvert? No, I don't think I do; at all events, I never had one that came true. I remember I had a horrid presentiment once that Daisy would meet with an accident on a certain day, and took all sorts of precautions in consequence, but it never came to anything. If I was ever disposed to be superstitious, I think that cured me."

She is talking almost gaily now, the undefinable expression of disappointment having faded out of her face, and left it for the moment as it ought ever to be—young and radiant.

"But putting superstition, which cannot be too highly deprecated, on one side," remarks Mr Laurence, the rector of Felton, for whom Lady Gwynne has a very high respect, "do you not think it at the least probable, that occasionally such convictions are granted in order to warn us against danger that may be averted?"

"Do we ever take advantage of such warnings, Mr Laurence?"

"In your own case, with regard to your child, you say you did."

"Ah, that was all nonsense! I was ashamed of myself for it afterwards."

"What has always struck me as so suspicious about presentiments," resumes Major Calvert, who is one of the guests then resident at Felton Hall, "is, that we never hear anything about them till their prognostications have been proved correct. What I should like would be to receive the confidence of my friend as soon as the conviction strikes his mind, and then watch with him the issue of events."

"Well, next time I have a presentiment with regard to Daisy, Major Calvert, I promise I will let you know."

"And take no precautions, Lady Gwynne?"

"Ah! that is too much to ask me."

"Yes, indeed," says Mr Laurence, almost in her ear. "If we would rest calmly on the thought of the future, we must do our best in the present. Heaven helps those who help themselves."

But here Sir Lyster's loud voice again fills the apartment, and directs the attention of every one present to itself.

"You may take my word for it," he is exclaiming, "that the Conservative Government will never find itself in power again."

"But should this bill pass"—— commences Stanley Penryhn, who is brother to the county member, and a man with unusual opportunities for gaining private information with respect to political matters.

"The bill be hanged!" interrupted his host, with that sweet indifference to etiquette that is the characteristic of men of his metal. "I wouldn't believe it from the Premier's own mouth. The Conservatives have had their day, and they'd better make the most of it. That's my advice to them!—What's that?—a letter?"

And seizing an epistle from the salver which a servant has just presented to him, Sir Lyster tears off the envelope, and commences to devour its contents, whilst his friends, delighted with the opportunity to escape from his blatant boredom, walk off to the other side of the drawing-room, and wish they could devise a decent motive for retiring from the scene altogether.

It is a large, official-looking envelope, with a splashy red seal, that Sir Lyster has received. Lady Gwynne noticed the seal as it was carried into the apartment, and feels an unusual curiosity to learn from whom it comes.

Her friends continue to address her upon various subjects, and she to answer them; but her attention is only partially arrested, and her flushed and careworn face keeps turning to the hearth-rug, where her husband is interweaving the perusal of his letter with a dislocated commentary, which is equally uninteresting and unintelligible to most of his hearers.

"Dear me!—Very remarkable!—Very gratifying!—How people do come together in this world.—His son, too!—Very strange!—Who would have dreamt of it?"

At last she speaks to him.

"What is it, Lyster? No bad news, I hope!"

"Oh, dear no! Quite the contrary—only a coincidence! But really it's the most curious thing possible. Here's this fellow,"—slapping the envelope to denote which fellow—"whom I've not even heard of since we were chums together

at Cambridge, writes to tell me that his son, having fallen into ill-health from over-work, has been ordered perfect rest and quiet, and is staying at Burwood—that little place the other side of Leighton, you know. His son! Ill from over-work! Pshaw! how absurd it seems. Why, when we parted, he had only just gone into tail coats himself. It is incredible!"

"But whose son? Of whom are you speaking?"

"William Slade's—old Bill Slade, that was in the first form with me at Eton, and is now, by his own showing, Master of the Blankshire foxhounds, and magistrate of the county. From what he says here, I presume that his son—what does he call him?—Auberon, is literary, though what Bill Slade can have been about to bring up his eldest son to anything of that sort, I am unable to imagine."

Sir Lyster says, "anything of that sort," in a voice of the supremest contempt. His physical temperament is robust and hearty in the extreme; he no more believes in sentiment than he does in physic; ignores a heartache with a headache; and has a wholesome horror of anything like poetry, painting, or the fine arts.

But as he speaks, Lady Gwynne's eyes deepen, and her colour comes and goes.

"What name did you say, Lyster? Auberon Slade—surely not the poet?"

At this suggestion there arises a chorus of interrogation.

"What! the author of 'Memories,' and the 'Satire of Life?'"

"Oh, it cannot be. Why, his volumes were the rage of last season."

"Hasn't he written a novel too? That one that the *Times* made such a fuss about?"

"It must be a connection. Yet the name is an uncommon one."

They are all buzzing about Sir Lyster as though they were a swarm of bees, and the name of Auberon Slade the sacrilegious hand that has upset them. Only Lady Gwynne remains silent, with her anxious eyes raised towards her husband's face, and Mr Laurence, as he glances in her direction, thinks she looks as though a spell had suddenly fallen on her.

Sir Lyster is not flattered by the general doubt thrown upon the personality of his new-found friend. If a poet be

really a more desirable guest to entertain than beings who cannot string two jangling rhymes together, why should not Felton Hall have the honour of covering his head as well as any other roof?

Sir Lyster has a magnified idea of Felton Hall, and everything belonging to it, and feels nettled by the remarks of his acquaintances, and determined to prove them in the wrong.

"Why shouldn't he be the poet?" he interrupts them, testily. "Hang it! he might be a better thing a thousand times over, and so I shall tell him without any reserve. But he is William Slade's son, and his father recommends him to my notice, and that's quite enough for me. I shall ride over to Burwood the first thing to-morrow morning, and bring him back with me. Poet or no poet, young Slade shall have little reason to complain of the hospitality of Felton Hall, and so we will prove to him. His father knew better than to suppose I would permit the son of my old college chum to put up at a dirty country inn, and I shall write and tell him so. It is most gratifying to think that Bill Slade should have remembered to write to me, and after so many years too—very gratifying; it pleases me highly. I should hardly have thought he would have remembered me."

So he runs on, in an unctuous, well-satisfied manner, whilst his wife is listening to the congratulations of her female friends.

"Only fancy! having Auberon Slade under the same roof with you. How charming, Lady Gwynne! You will be reading poetry together all day long. How I envy you!"

She listens, but she does not smile; if anything, looks troubled at the prospect.

"You forget that Mr Slade is ill, and down here only for the purpose of recovering his health."

"Oh, but not too ill surely to repeat his own charming verses, and tell you what first put such ideas in his head. The clever creature! What a number of questions you will have to ask him! What a treat there is in store for you! O, Mrs Blake, are you really going?"

And here, the general commotion excited by the propinquity of last season's favourite having provoked a general rising, the opportunity for breaking up the long, dull evening is gladly taken advantage of, and in a few moments more the farewells

are over, the carriages have rolled away, the bachelor guests of Felton Hall have adjourned with Sir Lyster to his sanctum, and Lady Gwynne is left standing in the deserted drawing-room alone.

The hour is late, and she is weary; but there is a vague, bewildered feeling of unrest floating in her mind, which makes the thought of the close sleeping-chamber overhead distasteful to her; and, throwing a shawl about her shoulders, she steps hastily out through the French windows of the drawing-room upon the lawn, and lifts her heated face to meet the evening breeze.

It is a peaceful world she gazes on—too peaceful to find an echo in her heart—quiet, almost unnaturally so, and still, with the great harvest moon shining above it; the restful night lit up as the unrestful day, and yet as unlike day as the hot happiness of this earth is to the tranquil bliss that heavy-laden souls look forward to in heaven. The white and crimson roses that clung so confidingly to the deep porch with early dawn, now, shame-faced at the day's debauch, shrink backward from its embrace, and hang their full-blown beauties from weak and enervated stalks, whilst their strong scent mingles with the still sodden air, and turns it sickly.

The patient cattle, standing ankle-deep in the rich pasture meadows that surround the Hall, are still as death, sleeping as they stand; not a sound, but the sound of her own breathing strikes upon her ear, as Lady Gwynne leans with both her arms upon the iron fence that skirts the lawn, and looks up at the starry heavens, whilst the tears gather in her eyes, and fall quickly upon her cheek. She feels lonely, and unhappy, and desolate, though she could hardly tell you why.

Oh, uncongeniality in marriage! Is there a greater curse to fall on man or woman? Here is a case of no hard blows or rough ill treatment, not even of hard words or petty tyranny, and yet the great unfilled void, the aching sense of solitude which must make itself felt by every mind that yearns for sympathy, is eating into the core of, at least one of, the hearts thus unnaturally linked together. Yet Gwendoline Gwynne looks up trustfully at the harvest moon, and brushes away her tears, and tries hard to battle with the feeling of depression which is creeping over her.

"How foolish I am!" she says, impatiently; "what on

earth have I to cry about? I ought to be ashamed of myself! My life is so peaceful and undisturbed, that it spoils me for annoyance, until even weariness brings tears."

And then, to divert her thoughts, she commences to murmur favourite lines of poetry, half aloud and half to herself, as if she were reciting a part.

> "Wait, and Love himself will bring
> The drooping flower of knowledge changed to fruit
> Of wisdom. Wait: my faith is large in Time,
> And that which shapes it to some perfect end.
>
> "Wait, and Love himself will bring"———

she commences again, running over and over the sweet, solemn words, as though she were bringing down all the powers of her soul to bear upon, and comprehend their meaning, whilst her earnest eyes dilate beneath the force of her imagination.

"I feel unusually depressed to-night," she thinks again, after a little pause. "What is it that lies upon my heart like lead? Daisy and Lyster are well, and I am in perfect health, and nothing has gone wrong. Why should I be so sorrowful? My life is as unclouded and tranquil as that moon. Am I different from other people, that my spirit will not keep pace with my existence?"

She glances upward as she speaks, with the tears still glistening on her cheeks, but as she gazes, a dark cloud moves slowly across the moon's disc, and for a moment hides it from her view.

Lady Gwynne looks fixedly, almost fearfully at it for the same space of time, and then, drawing her shawl more closely about her shoulders, she turns swiftly to the house, and will not glance that way again.

CHAPTER II.

LADY GWYNNE'S PRESENTIMENT.

She re-enters by the same means by which she left, and the first object that catches her eye on stepping over the threshold of the empty drawing-room, is the letter with the splashy

red seal, which Sir Lyster had thrust upon the mantelpiece when he quitted the apartment.

Lady Gwynne seems fascinated by that seal; it draws her to it, as the magnet draws the loadstone, and she takes the envelope in her hands, almost against her own will, and turns it over and over, and examines the superscription and the impress, thoughtfully.

A blood-red hand casting a thunderbolt, with the motto, "I shall succeed," cut rather ostentatiously beneath it; a brave motto for an aspirant after literary fame: so thinks Lady Gwynne, as, with a sigh, she lays the letter in its place again.

"How strange," she muses, "that, after all the pleasure I have taken in his poetry,—why, I nearly wore out that volume of 'Memories' last autumn!—I seem to have no desire to meet this man; on the contrary, I would avoid it. Can it be because he is ill, and likely to give us trouble? How selfish and inhospitable I must have grown. Or is it the fear of not being able to entertain worthily a mind so much above me?"

But at this thought she smiles, though sadly.

"Hardly that, when we have had such men as Professor Hümmel and Doctor Barclay staying here, and no ridiculous ideas ever entered my head with regard to them. Oh, it must be a mere fancy, founded on my absurd love of poetry, which makes me feel afraid of meeting Auberon Slade; or, perhaps it is nothing at all but the effects of a thunderstorm brewing in the air. What impressionable fools we women are!"

But fanciful or not, she does not appear capable of easily dismissing the notion from her mind, for when Sir Lyster Gwynne, much impregnated with the fumes of tobacco, and brandy and soda, comes noisily up the stairs, an hour or so afterwards, banging every door with which he has to do, and uttering "Good nights" to his companions upon the very threshold of his wife's apartment, he finds her still sitting in the arm-chair by the half-closed window, and apparently lost in a deep reverie.

"Holloa!" he exclaims, roughly; "why are you sitting here? Don't you intend to go to bed to-night?"

"Oh, yes! by and by; but the evening air is so cool and pleasant. Lyster, is there any *necessity* that we should ask Mr Slade to stay at Felton Hall?"

The question comes so unexpectedly, so perfectly irrelevantly to the subject in hand, that the baronet, who is not particularly quick at grasping an inference, stares at her for a moment in complete bewilderment.

"What *are* you talking about? Any necessity for behaving with hospitality towards Bill Slade's son? Why, of course there is! all the necessity in the world; in fact, one couldn't possibly do anything else. I shall ride over to Burwood the first thing to-morrow, and bring him back with me, and tell him this is his home as long as he chooses to make it so. I am quite anxious to see the young fellow. I wonder if he is like his father!"

"But don't you think it will be rather imprudent to ask him here for an indefinite period before we know how long he may be getting well again? Nor even what he is ill of?"

"Ha! ha! ha! I suppose you have fearful visions of small-pox and scarlet fever; and of seeing Daisy's smooth face scarred and pitted for life. No—no! my dear; depend upon it, *I* will take care of that. I have not been master of myself and of my household for so many years without having learned how to look after both my own interest and yours."

Sir Lyster delivers this truth with considerable satisfaction to himself; it is a fact which he is so fond of impressing on all whom it may concern, that some of the household have been found sufficiently sacrilegious to doubt its being a fact at all. But take heed, Sir Lyster, there are diseases in this world more baneful even than the small-pox and the scarlet fever! Lady Gwynne does not look satisfied, she leans her head upon her hand, and lets her eyes rove into vacancy; and her husband is not so dull that he cannot perceive the drift of her imagination.

"Why, I thought you were all for poetry and such-like fiddle-faddle!" he exclaims, almost angrily, "and would jump out of your skin to have the maker of such trash to entertain. What's up now? What more objections have you to make upon the subject?"

But she does not heed his rough sarcasm, or, if she heeds, she does not notice it. She only rises quickly from her chair, and places one hand on her husband's arm, and fixes on his face her earnest eyes.

"O Lyster, be advised by me, and do not ask that

man to Felton Hall until you know something more about him."

"But why? What reason have you for saying so?"

At that she looks bewildered, and half foolish.

"I cannot tell you—I do not know. It may be only a fancy on my part. But, remember, you have never seen him, and the house is so full at present; and I have an idea, somehow, that—that—we shall not get on together."

"What absurd folly! when you have not even met the man!"

"I know that—but he is ill, and will require rest and quiet; and our house is always noisy and boisterous."

"Hang it all!" is the impatient reply; "I suppose we can give the fellow quiet if he wishes it. Let him have the green-room, with the morning-room next to it, and sit there as many hours as he likes. But I hope I shall find him of different metal from that. He may write as much rotten poetry as he chooses, but if he has a drop of his father's blood in his veins, he will know a partridge from a pheasant when he sees it, and handle a gun better than he does a pen. So now, let's get to bed, and hear no more of this nonsense. Auberon Slade is *my* guest, not yours; and all you have to do is to see he has enough to eat, and is not laid between damp sheets."

"Oh, I will promise so far," she answers, with a faint smile, as she retires from the wordy contest, and offers no further remonstrance to her husband's wishes.

But the next morning—a glorious morning, lighted with one unbroken stream of sunshine, and canopied with perfect blue—when Sir Lyster, bluff and hearty, but considering no one's wishes but his own, has ridden away from the very breakfast-table to make acquaintanceship with the recluse of Burwood, Major Calvert finds Lady Gwynne standing in one of the recesses of the old-fashioned dining-room windows, looking thoughtfully—almost solemnly—at the brilliant display that nature has spread out before her.

"Sir Lyster will have a hot ride," he remarks, casually, as he joins her; "but he is determined to be back by luncheon-time."

"Will he be back by luncheon?" with a look of inquiry.

"So he says; and with the phenomenon in tow. Are you very curious to see him, Lady Gwynne? Miss Musgrave has

been unable to eat any breakfast this morning in consequence of her anticipation."

"Oh! now, Major Calvert, that is too bad of you!" exclaims Emily Musgrave, a county belle, still in her teens; "when you know that all I said was, that I wondered if he wore long hair and turned-down collars. It is a great shame to repeat it, and I'll never tell you anything again."

"Did I repeat it?" demands the major, in a voice of injury. "I only said that anxiety had robbed you of your appetite."

"Which you know is not the truth," pouts the offended beauty. "As if I cared what Mr Slade is like. And I daresay, after all, that he will turn out a most commonplace individual, who will smoke and drink brandy and water, and care for nobody but himself, like all the rest of you."

"He might even be worse," retorts her opponent; "he might prove to be a married man! For you know," he adds, after having enjoyed the quick look of consternation excited by his supposition, "we have never heard anything to the contrary! What do you say, Lady Gwynne? Is this Slade to turn out a *rara avis*, or a very ordinary barn-door fowl?"

"I do not know. I cannot possibly say," she answers, hurriedly. "I have not had time to think about it yet. Oh! how intensely hot the day is going to be."

"Too hot for riding, or walking, or anything," acquiesces Miss Musgrave, as she takes up a station by the side of her hostess.

"Will it be too hot to drive to Chorley Farm with me and Daisy, do you think, Emily? Old Nurse Richards is sick, and I have promised for some time to go over, and sit an hour with her. You will find the shady old garden there cool enough, and the fruit the finest in the county."

"Oh, charming!" exclaims the younger lady; "there is nothing in this world I like so much as visiting poor people, and seeing all their funny little ways. But we shall be back by luncheon-time, I suppose, Lady Gwynne?"

A smile curls up the corners of Lady Gwynne's expressive mouth; the first smile that has circled there that morning.

"Oh, certainly! that is, if we start at once. I have already ordered the pony carriage, and Daisy is being dressed at the present moment. You will not have to wait for us, Emily."

"Then I will go and get ready," replies Emily, as she rushes

from the breakfast-room, which has long since been deserted excepting by these three.

Major Calvert is left alone with Lady Gwynne; he notes her heavy eyes, and look of general depression, and he is a friend of sufficiently long standing to be entitled to remark on them.

"You are not well, Lady Gwynne, or you are troubled. I cannot remember when I have seen you look so little bright before."

She smiles and sighs at the same time.

"Am I given, then, to constant giggling?"

"Like some one who shall be nameless! Scarcely! and you knew it before you put the question. But you cannot deceive me by trying to avoid inquiry. If you are well, there must be some cause for the deep thought in which you have been wrapped this morning."

"I have no wish to deceive you, Major Calvert—on the contrary, it will be a relief to speak to you about it. There *is* a cause for my depression, but one for which I am totally unable to account—a horrible foreboding of evil—I cannot tell why or wherefore—has been hanging over me like a black cloud ever since last evening!"

"Of evil! to yourself or others?"

"Oh, don't ask me! I know nothing about it!" she exclaims, half wildly. "I only feel that it is there; and that I cannot shake it off. I am sure that something is going to happen; my heart is like lead within my bosom." And with that the tears well up into the sweet grey eyes and stand quivering on the long dark lashes, ready to fall with her next breath.

Major Calvert is interested; he is not one of those men who are hoodwinked by the affable demeanour of his host; he has long guessed that all is not constant sunshine within Felton Hall; and this little appeal to his sympathy on the part of Lady Gwynne flatters his vanity. Yet what can he say, excepting that he trusts her surmise may not prove true.

"Perhaps it is the weather that affects your spirits," he suggests, soothingly. "Such heat as this is enough to try any one."

But of this suggestion she takes no notice.

"You remember what we were saying last evening about presentiments," she goes on, presently, "and I promised I

would tell you next time I had one. Major Calvert," with a serious emphasis, that for the moment greatly impresses her hearer, "I have a strong presentiment this morning that some great misfortune is in store for me. Now, don't say afterwards, when it has come to pass, that I never told you of it!"

"But—good heavens! Lady Gwynne, in what way do you anticipate this evil—by death—or how?"

At this she stands silent for a moment, as though considering.

"Yes!—I think by death; or by something very like it. Don't think me a coward, Major Calvert, but I feel afraid today—afraid of shadows—and that is not my nature, as you know."

"But, under the circumstances, you must not, you really should not, drive to Chorley alone. Let me go with you, Lady Gwynne, or take a servant."

At the proposal her lip curls.

"Oh, you mistake me, Major Calvert. It is not of *things* I am afraid—I would ride the new filly to Chorley Farm, or put my own horse at the highest leap I have ever attempted yet, if you were to dare me."

"What, then, do you fear?"

The vague look comes back again.

"That is what I cannot tell you. Myself or nothing, it is all the same; there is a dead weight here"—laying her hand upon her breast—"which I cannot get rid of; the black shadow of the evil which is coming upon me. Do not let us talk of it any more, Major Calvert. Talking can do no good! Let me get out into the fresh air, and forget it, if I can."

CHAPTER III.

PUTTING OFF THE EVIL MOMENT.

THE little inn at Burwood, with its low ceilings, whitewashed walls, and general air of rustic simplicity, is much more in accordance with the feelings of Auberon Slade at the present moment, than his father's country house in Blankshire, or even his own chambers in town, which are fitted up with every

luxury that modern art can devise, or taste require. He has been ordered a complete change, and a completer change could scarcely have been found for him.

The deepest tranquillity, the most perfect repose, reign along the shady paths and rippling streams of Burwood, and our hero revels in them day after day, and tries altogether to banish the unwelcome thought that he must, at some future time, return to work and to the world again. For the world has not used him very kindly of late.

A brilliant literary *debût*, followed by the usual amount of flattery and adulation, which, in fashionable language, means being much sought after, as a thing to be stared at, and commented upon, at réunions and conversaziones, had, during the past season, lifted Auberon Slade into a position higher than that to which, by birth or merit, he was entitled, and slightly turned his head with respect to his own pretensions.

And this mistake had been followed by a crushing of his pride, a levelling of his ambition, which, to a man of his sensitive nature, was very hard to bear. But, determined to bear it, or to kill it, he had returned to work with an energy worthy of its cause, but too fierce for a nature so finely organised that it suffered trebly in proportion to that of other men. So that mental labour was soon followed by physical debility, and Auberon Slade was ordered by his medical attendants to leave literature to itself for the present, and take up trout-fishing, or any other pursuit that laid no tax upon the brain, instead. Which accounts for his being found beside the quiet streams of Burwood.

On first arrival, he had been disposed to grumble at everything around him ; but by the time we meet him, when he has been located there for a whole fortnight, he is enchanted with the little village, and the unbroken rest by which it is pervaded.

He loves to wander, hour after hour, beside the stream, filling his creel with speckled trout almost mechanically, as his thoughts wander forth into the rich fields of fancy, and resolve themselves into flowing metre and soft dulcet rhyme.

And then to return to the unpretentious inn to dinner, where, if it cannot tempt, there is nothing to offend, his taste ; and, during the long warm August evenings, to stretch himself upon the grass with his cigar, and dream, not un-

kindly, of what "might have been," and feel the soothing influence of the hour calm his spirits, until he rises up again, almost contented, and quite willing that events should be determined for us, and we not left to follow the bent of our own inclinations.

He is recovering so rapidly from his disappointment, under the combined effects of time and absence, that he grudges a thought to anything that bears upon the past, and dreads the slightest interruption to the monotony of his existence.

He hates the postman, who finds his way even to Burwood, and brings him letters that disturb his rest,—importunate letters from his publishers, and trifling letters from his female friends, and, occasionally, one of those official-looking envelopes, with the splashy red seal, that had so impressed Lady Gwynne, and the contents of which usually opens his old sore by some rough allusion to the past, or suggestion with respect to the future.

How heartily he desires that they could forget him, even as he wishes to forget them.

And so fearful is he of having his solitude broken in upon, that the arrival of a stray traveller, for bait and refreshment, at the Burwood inn, is sufficient to send Auberon Slade out with his rod until the shades of evening have fallen, and all chance of encountering the obnoxious intruder gone.

Judge, then, of his disgust, when, on the morning in question, having lingered over his breakfast until a later hour than usual, the keeper of the little hostelry throws open the door of his sitting-room, and, with considerable pride, announces "Sir Lyster Gwynne."

Auberon Slade, starting to his feet, is about to exclaim that there must be some mistake, but the manner of the new comer at once undeceives him.

"My dear Slade! I am delighted to make your acquaintance. I had no idea you were here, until I received a letter from your father last evening. Hadn't heard from him for years! A most remarkable coincidence! I've come to carry you back with me to Felton Hall. You must take my man's horse, and he will return in the cart, which will be over for your luggage in the course of an hour."

Nothing can be a greater contrast than these two men present to each other;—the one bluff, hearty, and robust in

the extreme, with round open eyes that know no variation of light and shade, and a confident manner that carries everything before it; the other, pale, quiet, and dignified, with an appearance of great reserve, but the power of feeling too plainly stamped on every feature to augur well for his happiness in this world.

Sir Lyster has thrust his hand into that of Auberon Slade, who is forced to take it whether he will or no; but the vague glance that he directs towards his new acquaintance shows how incapable he is of comprehending the honour done him.

"Ah! you don't know me, I see!—I suppose your father has not yet written to you on the subject. Didn't think I should be so ready to pick you up—eh! But I never forget an old friend. I am Sir Lyster Gwynne, of Felton Hall, in this county; and your father was one of my old Cambridge chums long before you were thought of."

"Oh! I comprehend!" said Auberon Slade, as he rescues his hand from the baronet's grasp. "I am sure it is very good of you, Sir Lyster, to take the trouble to come over and see me. I was not aware my father had the honour of your acquaintance. Won't you take a chair?"

"No time to sit down, my dear boy—I have a whole covey of guests waiting for me at home, and I promised to be back by luncheon. How soon will you be ready to start?"

"To start?" Auberon Slade has not realised the opening part of Sir Lyster's address to him.

"Yes! to come back to Felton Hall with me. You don't suppose I am going to let old Bill Slade's son put up in a dirty little hole like this, whilst there is a spare bed in Felton Hall to receive him. No such thing, my dear fellow; you sleep under my roof to-night, or nowhere at all."

"You are very good. I hardly know what to say to your proposal."

He means that he hardly knows what to say against it. He is horrified at this sacrilegious intrusion upon his peace—detests the very idea of going to stay at Felton Hall—has taken a violent dislike even to the cordiality of the familiar invitation, and the presumptuous assurance of his ready acceptance of it—and yet he does not know what excuse to bring forward for the refusal that is trembling on his tongue.

Sir Lyster evidently imagines that it is gratitude that keeps him silent.

"Come, come, my dear fellow! no thanks! When you come to know me better, you will find that it is my greatest satisfaction to do little kindnesses of this sort; and I have never forgotten anybody who has been associated with my school days. It is quite sufficient for me that you are your father's son, to render seeing you under my roof a pleasure—quite a pleasure!"

And Sir Lyster pats Auberon Slade upon the shoulder in a patronising manner, as though he were a schoolboy.

The young man flushes, and is silent. If he has a predominating fault, it is self-esteem; and he is wounded instead of gratified by the behaviour of the baronet.

Where can this bumpkin have vegetated, who has never heard that some of the highest names in the kingdom have considered it more than a pleasure to receive Auberon Slade under their roofs, and solicited his appearance there as a favour done to themselves? When he next speaks, it is with a coldness that would have made itself apparent to any one less dense than Sir Lyster Gwynne.

"Thanks! I am much obliged to you, I am sure, for your good intentions on my behalf; but I regret that I am totally unable to avail myself of them."

"But why?"

"I have been ordered here for my health, and am compelled to remain in the strictest seclusion."

"You shall be as quiet in our house as you like. I have desired Lady Gwynne to appoint you a couple of rooms, where you can remain all day if it so pleases you."

"But I am forbidden to keep late hours."

"At Felton Hall, my dear Slade, every one gets up and goes to bed at the hour he likes best; so that excuse is no excuse at all."

"But—of course, I am most flattered by the pressing nature of your invitation, Sir Lyster—but I have work to finish during the next few weeks which it is absolutely necessary I should do, but which would be quite impracticable, I fear, amidst such a party as you doubtless have assembled at Felton Hall."

"My dear fellow! you will be your own master in every

respect, and can use your time as you think fit. Your father has made me perfectly aware that rest and quiet are necessary for your restoration to health; and Lady Gwynne is quite prepared to receive in you a guest who is to be allowed to do exactly as he likes."

Auberon Slade hesitates; the offer is certainly tempting, added to which he does not know what further objection to bring forward in opposition to it.

"Lady Gwynne is exceedingly good; indeed, I hardly know how to thank her or yourself, Sir Lyster, for your cordiality to a perfect stranger. Still—I"——

"My dear Slade! the thing is settled; your rooms are waiting for you in Felton Hall, and there can be no possible reason for your remaining here. How long will it take you to put up your traps?"

"Oh! not five minutes, if that is all"—and Auberon Slade moves thoughtfully towards the door; he feels that he shall go to Felton Hall against his will, and yet some internal influence urges him to hold to his first resolution, which causes him to halt upon the threshold, and make one last attempt at resistance.

"Sir Lyster, there really is an obstacle that is not to be overcome. I had forgotten it until this moment. I have no evening clothes with me."

At this, the baronet bursts into a loud roar of laughter.

"Telegraph for them, Slade; meanwhile, I will lend you a suit of mine."

It is the stranger's turn to smile now, as he glances from his own slight limbs to Sir Lyster's portly figure.

"Well! if that won't do, we will excuse the morning clothes. Lady Gwynne would excuse anything in a poet. Hang it all, man, come over and try us for a week; and if you don't like your quarters by that time, we'll give you leave to return to Burwood. But come with me to-day, you must; for I've pledged my word to it."

There is nothing further to be said then; and in a few minutes more, my hero is wrestling with the straps and buckles of his portmanteau, but in anything but a good humour with himself.

"It strikes me forcibly that I've done a very foolish thing," he thinks, as, having accomplished his purpose, he passes the

brushes through his hair. "What are these Gwynnes to me, that I should give up my enjoyment to swell the list of their guests? But I don't see how the deuce I could have got out of it either! It's just like my father's bungling interference to tell them I was here. Well, it's too late to alter now, but I shall seize the first opportunity I can to make an excuse to return to town. They've spoilt my holiday with a vengeance!"

In which agreeable mood Sir Lyster bears him back in triumph to the Felton luncheon-table.

Five minutes after their horses have been led round to the stables, a pony-chaise comes creeping up the carriage-drive, and turns into the stable-yard, instead of drawing up before the house as usual.

"Why this novelty?" exclaims one of its occupants, curiously.

"It's about the men's dinner-hour," is Lady Gwynne's evasive answer; and then, as her eye catches sight of the horses which are just being unsaddled, she asks the helper who has come to hold the pony's head, quickly, almost eagerly, if Sir Lyster has returned from Burwood.

"Yes, my lady."

"With—with anybody else?"

"With another gentleman, my lady. The gentleman rode James's horse. James is to return with the spring-cart. The spring-cart has started for the gentleman's luggage, my lady!"

"Oh, come! *that's* all right," exclaims Miss Musgrave, delightedly, as she reaches the ground, and helps Daisy after her.

But Lady Gwynne does not seem delighted.

"I have such a dreadful headache," she says, dejectedly, as they walked towards the house together. "I don't feel at all fit to appear at the luncheon-table to-day."

"Oh! but I am sure the sight of Mr Slade will cure you, Lady Gwynne! Only fancy his being really here! I can hardly believe it. I hope there will be time to run upstairs and make one's self decent before luncheon."

But as they reach the upper corrider, her companion halts and almost staggers.

"Emily, I am really in great pain. I don't think that I can go down. You must tell Sir Lyster, and make my ex-

cuses to Mr Slade. The heat of the day has been too much for me. If I can sleep for an hour or so, I shall be all right again."

But as she turns into her bedroom, her heart is beating faster than her head, and the feeling that is knocking there is very much like fear.

She feels safer, she could not say wherefore, within the precincts of her own chamber; and relieved, she does not know why, that she has put off the meeting with her new guest for a few hours longer.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CLOUD BREAKS.

LEFT to herself, and overpowered by the sultry weather and the pain in her head, Lady Gwynne falls into a restless slumber, from which she is but too soon aroused by the heavy knuckles of Sir Lyster upon the bedroom door.

"Well, what 's the matter with you?" he exclaims, as he takes a seat by her bedside. "Why the deuce weren't you down at luncheon? Sick or sulky—eh?"

"Sick," she answers, languidly, as she presses one feverish hand against her burning temples. "I have such a dreadful headache, I can hardly hold my head up at all."

"Then why are you such a fool as to go out in the sun? You know you can't stand it, and you might have a little more consideration when I am expecting you to do the honours of the Hall to a new guest."

"I am sorry, Lyster. I will try to make up for it, by rendering myself doubly agreeable, if I can, at dinner."

Her ready submission touches some fibre in his coarse nature, and he stoops and kisses her. She shrinks from, almost shudders at, the rough embrace; but she endures it quietly, and it is all that he demands of her.

His is no sensitive spirit to discern in a moment where it is welcomed or repulsed; and she has no other light but his, by which to interpret her own feelings. Her private opinion, when she forms one, is, that she was born cold-blooded and

dislikes all familiarities. She never dreams that there may be sweeter kisses in the world for her than these—kisses which shall seem to lift her from this earth to heaven!

"Well! I bagged my bird, as perhaps they've told you," resumes Sir Lyster, after a pause.

"Yes! I heard that he had come."

"And will stay into the bargain, if I have any voice in the matter. A fine young fellow as ever stepped. I can't think what Bill Slade can have been dreaming of to put him into the book trade. However, he says it was his own choice. Queer, very queer! He ought to have been a farmer or a country gentleman like myself."

"Yes," incredulously.

"Ah! I know what you're expecting to see! A melancholy-looking chap, with lanky hair, and bones coming through his skin, wasted with misery—eh?"

"Indeed! I expect no such thing," she interrupts, indignantly.

"But you're vastly mistaken, I can tell you. A capital fellow, who can talk on any subject, is devoted to sport, and knows good wine when he sees it."

"I never doubted his capability in that respect," she murmurs.

"With a neat, light figure, that I'd take my oath never rides an ounce over eleven stone. A first-rate horseman, and looking forward to the shooting season as eagerly as either Calvert or myself."

"It is lucky he has such tastes, for we shall be able to amuse him here."

"Oh yes, I hope so; but he says he has some confounded scribbling to finish that will keep him in during the mornings. However, he has promised to ride over the estate with me this afternoon, so I must go and join him. You will be down to dinner?"

"Oh, certainly. I hope you made my excuses to Mr Slade."

"Ha, ha, ha! I told him you were dying to see a real live poet, and I suppose it was excitement at the prospect that had made you take to your bed so early in the day. Ha, ha, ha! we had a good laugh over it, I can tell you, and Slade seemed as much amused as anybody."

But, little pointed as the sarcasm is, it has the effect of making Lady Gwynne's cheeks burn like fire.

"You didn't really, Lyster!" starting up in her bed. "Oh, how foolish, how unkind of you! You make me feel quite ashamed to meet the man. And you know that it is not the truth."

"Oh, come!" blusters Sir Lyster (Sir Lyster always does bluster when he feels himself to be in the wrong), "it 's no use making a fuss about it! What does it signify after all? The man is not likely to care two straws whether you are excited about meeting him or not. And if he does, you are clever enough to undeceive him."

But no comment on his remark issues from his wife's closed lips.

"Well! if you choose to be sulky I can't help it. I have no more time to waste here! Good-bye." And, whistling loudly, Sir Lyster slams the bedroom door after him and stumps down into the hall.

She listens to his retreating footsteps, and then turns on her bed, and tries to sleep again—but the power to sleep is gone.

"It is so annoying," she thinks, as the subject which has disturbed her revolves in her mind, "to be misrepresented to a perfect stranger, and made to appear in such a foolish light. What can he think of me? Oh! how I wish I had made an effort to go down to luncheon! Anything would have been better than this. The man will suppose I am a perfect idiot."

Lady Gwynne is not aware that if Auberon Slade wishes to keep up his character for originality he must find another epithet for her, having already applied the one in question to her husband.

"How can I tell what influence such a speech may have upon him?" she muses. "He may be some frivolous, self-conceited creature (people are often so different from what they say or sing) who will augur all kinds of nonsense from my supposed anxiety to meet him. And when I would have avoided it than otherwise. It is too provoking!" and with a sigh she throws her flushed face again upon the pillows.

It is a relief to have the reverie that follows broken in

upon by the entrance of Miss Musgrave, brimful of intelligence about the new arrival.

"My dear Lady Gwynne, may I come in? How is your poor head? Every one was so concerned about you at luncheon! And I wanted you there so much. I am dying to hear your opinion about Mr Slade."

"What is your opinion, Emily?"

"My dear!"—with uplifted hands—"I 'm horribly disappointed! It 's a dreadful confession to have to make, but I can't help it—it 's the truth! He 's not a bit like a poet! He 's the most ordinary looking creature possible."

Lady Gwynne cannot help smiling.

"I am sorry he has turned out such a failure, Emily!"

"Oh! he would not be so bad if he were any one but Auberon Slade. But he hasn't the appearance of a spark of romance about him. And to see him eat at luncheon—it was enough to disenchant anybody. Talk of his 'dead hopes' indeed (do you remember those lines, Lady Gwynne?) I am quite sure his appetite didn't die with them."

"Sir Lyster seems to anticipate a great deal of enjoyment from his society."

"Oh! I dare say he will do well enough for Sir Lyster," replies the younger lady, unobservant of the slur her words cast on the requirements of her host; "but I shall never believe he is the author of 'Memories.' Oh, those lovely verses! How they used to haunt me! Do you remember them, Lady Gwynne?"

Lady Gwynne knows them by heart, with many of their fellows, and is never tired of repeating them to herself; but she does not say so. Her only answer to Miss Musgrave's question is a simple acquiescence.

"Well! Mr Slade doesn't look a bit like that, you know! I don't believe he ever had a thought, or a memory—dead or alive!—he drinks much too much beer. I saw his tankard filled three times."

"O Emily, remember what a thirsty day it is, and be merciful! But what is he like, then?"

"Tall and slight, with a yellowish complexion, and no particular expression in his face. If he has any especial virtue, I should say it was inquisitiveness about other people's affairs; he looks so curiously out of the corners of his eyes.

But his chief amusement seemed eating. After which he picked his teeth, according to the fashion of the day, and took no more notice of anybody."

"He is not too formidable a lion then for me to encounter without apprehension," says Lady Gwynne, with an attempt at rousing herself.

"I should think not; the most commonplace individual possible! And not a bit handsome! My only desire now is, to find out who writes his books for him. I am quite sure he can't have done them himself. He looks a great deal too stupid."

"Perhaps he may improve upon acquaintance, Emily."

"There is room for it, Lady Gwynne; I hope he may."

This little conversation, instead of increasing, seems to lessen the indisposition of Lady Gwynne. Left to herself again, she rises from her bed, almost cheerfully, and rings for her maid to come and brush out her long, fair hair. This is an operation of which my heroine is particularly fond. She says that it refreshes her when weary, and soothes her when depressed. And as she submits to it this afternoon, dreamily hanging meanwhile over a book which she makes an attempt to read, the cloud seems to pass from her spirits, the air is lighter, the heat of the day more bearable; she even anticipates the moment when she shall go downstairs again.

"Fond of sport, and wine, and chatter," she ponders (her maid watching her reflection in the glass meanwhile, and wondering what would cause so palpable a shade of disappointment to pass over the features of her mistress); "and sufficiently ordinary to have a good appetite, and not to be ashamed to own it. Well! why should he? How could the mind work hard when the body is not well nourished? And as for his shooting and fishing propensities, his possession of them is the most fortunate thing in the world for me; for if his health permits of it, Lyster will be able to take him entirely off my hands. By the way, no one has mentioned anything about his health, excepting that he looks pale. Well! I need not have been alarmed on the score of meeting him. 'Commonplace' and 'ordinary.' How strange that a man should be so different in print to what he is in reality. I suppose he cannot really feel what he writes." But here certain lines, as full of music as they are of feeling, flash on the mind of Lady Gwynne,

and defy her to imagine that their author can be a man without a soul. Her cheeks flush as they vibrate through her memory, touching her heart-strings with a mysterious sympathy that seems but the echo of its own beating. So has she often longed to pour forth her unspoken sorrows, and give *that* a voice, which she has as yet hardly dared to whisper to herself; but she does not believe that she is capable of doing so; whilst Auberon Slade, though perfectly unknown to her, seems to have rifled all the treasures of her heart beforehand, and written down, for her especial benefit, what she has not the power to express. But if he is really all that Sir Lyster and Miss Musgrave have represented him to be, Lady Gwynne is quite certain that, in real life, they shall have no sympathy with one another.

"It is very puzzling," she concludes, with an inward sigh, as, the dressing of her hair completed, she proceeds to submit to the task of being robed for dinner; yet she looks brighter for the information she has received, and less careworn than she did in the morning. Her manner contradicts her statement, and seems far more as though she rejoiced to have heard that the acquaintanceship of Auberon Slade is no more to be desired than that of less-gifted mortals. Meanwhile the object of her meditation is no better reconciled to the position in which he has so unexpectedly found himself than at first. True, that both Sir Lyster and Miss Musgrave are correct in their reports, and his chagrin was not sufficient to rob him of his appetite at luncheon, or to render him silent and uncommunicative; for in yielding to the baronet's importunities, he feels that he has taken upon himself an obligation which, as a man of the world and a gentleman, he will fulfil to the uttermost. But the situation bores him; the ride round the estate has bored him; the egotistical, never-ending small talk of Sir Lyster has driven him wild; and as he prepares for dinner, striving to make himself look as fresh as he can in his morning clothes (another cause of worry, for Auberon Slade hates to appear before women in inappropriate costume), he is inventing all sorts of stories that will serve as plausible excuses to return to Burwood, or to town. The undeserved cordiality with which he has been received; the pleasures that are promised him; the luxuries by which he is surrounded; have no power to make him feel contented. He came down

to the country to obtain perfect rest and freedom from the restraints of society, and he has been baulked of his intentions against his own free will; and although he does not show it, he is out of temper with himself and the world. All this time he has not once thought of his hostess, except as an additional prospective source of annoyance to him; it has not entered his head to speculate on her probable appearance (he never thinks or cares about the looks of women now—all his feelings on that subject being buried with the dead hopes he mourns so prettily); but if an idea of her had crossed his mind, it would only have presented itself in a stout and imposing shape, a fit match to the charms of Sir Lyster. But having finished, as he best may, his toilet, and turned into an end of the long velvet-carpeted corridor which leads to the lower rooms, Auberon Slade is startled to come upon the figure of a woman; clad in a flowing robe of soft white muslin, relieved by knots of mauve ribbon; leaning out of one of the windows which look upon the park, and watching the glorious August sun as it sinks like a ball of fire behind the trees. There is nothing remarkable in this woman's figure, except that it is slight and graceful; nothing very remarkable in the high brow and rapt earnest eyes, turned up towards the evening sky; and yet our hero stands still, and thinks; not that she is pretty, or aristocratic, or well-formed, but simply that he has never met with such a face and figure before. There may be hundreds and thousands of women better looking and better made, but this one is original. The slight noise of his approaching footsteps causes her to turn her head, and she starts and leaves her position, and comes a little forward.

"Mr Slade, I presume," with a blush, and timidly proffered hand; "I am very glad indeed to see you—Sir Lyster told me you had arrived. I am so sorry I was unable to be down to luncheon."

And then Auberon Slade understands that he is in the presence of his hostess. Surprise for the first moment almost deprives him of his usual readiness of speech, but in the next he has recovered himself, and apologises freely for the roughness of his attire; whilst she, after one rapid glance at his face, keeps her eyes fixed upon the ground, and begs him not to mention the subject, from that point of view.

"Certainly not pretty," is his mental decision, as he slowly

follows Lady Gwynne down the broad staircase to the drawing-room, "not a single good feature in her face, and much too thin for my taste. But marvellously speaking eyes and mouth, and no lack of brains. I wonder what on earth made her marry such a brute as Sir Lyster."

"Emily is right," she thinks, as she precedes him; "decidedly commonplace, so far as his appearance is concerned, and very delicate-looking. I wish I could find something to say to him. I suppose I shall not feel so *bête* when we know each other a little better."

Yet, notwithstanding that she is so plain, and he so ordinary-looking, Lady Gwynne is conscious, more than once, during the dinner that succeeds, that the eyes of the new comer are bent upon her from the opposite side of the table; not in impertinence or idle curiosity, but with a kind of vague interest, as though he were trying to read some riddle in her face; and she cannot summon up the courage to lift her own to meet his gaze.

O hearts! that look out thus upon each other in the first hour, from strange eyes whose colour you have yet to learn—attracted by no outward circumstance of light or shade, but drawn together by a mysterious sympathy which you can neither account for nor dispel—take heed, be careful; and if an obstacle exists to your perfected union, fly from each other as you would fly a pestilence. For this sudden, undesired attraction, this electric message from a stranger's soul to yours, is not of earth; it is part of the inexplicable mystery that surrounds our being—God-given, either for happiness or misery, and far oftener for the latter than the former.

It is not Passion, for passion can generate at the vision of mere beauty; nor is it Love, in the common acceptation of the word, for love can live for hearts who love in answer, though their souls may never interchange a syllable.

It is something far more dangerous, more subtle, because more unsuspected in its influence, than these; it is the unspoken language of one everlasting spirit to another.

Passion evaporates with satiety; Love may turn to hate, or perish with its object; but Sympathy—true, soul-felt, and earnest—cannot die.

Conceived spontaneously, born in a moment, and full-grown in an hour, it exists to all eternity! It may be interrupted

upon earth, but it must be renewed in heaven; because it is the indissoluble marriage-tie between the only particles of us that meet again, unchanged.

There is a large party of guests assembled in Felton Hall at this period, but very few amongst them, comparatively speaking, are ladies, and not more than three or four companions accompany Lady Gwynne from the dining-table to the drawing-room. Then the comments pass freely upon Mr Slade, and are mostly found to agree with those of Emily Musgrave.

The new comer is too thin; his eyes are too small; his feet too large; and he talks to no one but the gentlemen at dinner; —which, after all, is the real cause of offence.

"Now, what do you think about him, Lady Gwynne? Are you not very much disappointed?"

She hardly knows what to answer: she scarcely remembers what the man is like. She is only conscious of a soft, new, delicious feeling of contentment creeping over all her senses, and making her feel as though some one had been speaking to her, and she were listening for the sound to be renewed. But they press her to reply.

"No; I don't think that I am so disappointed in him; but perhaps my expectations were not so high as yours. I think that we shall like him. Any way, we can but try."

And later in the evening, when her rippling laughter reaches Major Calvert's ears across the room, and he asks her slily what has become of the gloomy presentiment of the morning, she turns a face upon him which is free from any expression but that of complete satisfaction.

"Vanished! Major Calvert. Vanished altogether. I think I must have slept it away this afternoon. Now don't laugh at me in that manner! What a wretch you are! I declare you shall never extract one of my secrets from me again."

And her light laugh rings out once more through the apartment, until Auberon Slade, turning to look at her, thinks how unlike she appears to the woman whom he encountered that afternoon, leaning out of the corridor window, and gazing so intently at the setting sun.

CHAPTER V.

UNDER THE WALNUT TREE.

The next morning may be a very tempting one, but Auberon Slade successfully resists all endeavours on the part of his host to make him forget duty for pleasure, and retreats to his den directly after breakfast, thereby sinking considerably in Sir Lyster's opinion; though after his many promises to the contrary, he dared not combat his resolution. He cannot imagine what a young fellow can see in pen, and ink, and paper, to distract his attention from the prospect of a ride over to Chorley; nor how consent to shut himself up in a stifling room during the best part of the day.

When Calvert suggests that it may be business that detains Mr Slade in the house against his will, Sir Lyster becomes a little pacified; and as the major follows up his remark by a wish that he could turn *his* brains to any account, by Jove! the baronet is almost reconciled to the idea of leaving his literary guest at home.

For Sir Lyster only fusses and fumes and contradicts before women; he is too politic to show that side of his nature to his own sex; he can be bombastic enough with them, it is true, when left unchecked; but a manly opinion, decidedly expressed, generally draws an acquiescence from him; or, at least, commands his silence.

Lady Gwynne does not regard the resolution of their guest in the same light that her husband does. She admires him for it. Not knowing the objections he entertains to staying at Felton Hall, she fancies she reads in the expression of his face, that his heart for that morning, at all events, is not in his work, and once or twice she thinks he is on the point of yielding; but no! he holds firm against a strong opposition, and fights off all remonstrances with a simple "must."

And as she sees him walk deliberately upstairs, and hears him turn the key in the door of the morning-room allotted to his use, she feels almost proud, as though he were something

that belonged to her, and she held a personal interest in his strength of purpose.

She has not had the opportunity of closely observing the working of a strong, firm will, except in the person of Sir Lyster, whose virtues seldom stop short of their opposite extremes. And the quiet, unhesitating refusals of Auberon Slade do more than interest—they charm her.

But the gentleman in question, although he can be as resolute as he chooses in his own cause, is not perhaps deserving, on this particular occasion, of all the praise his hostess mentally awards him.

The morning is a glorious one, and moving through the fresh air would certainly be pleasanter than bending over manuscript in a close room; but he has work to finish that must be completed by a certain time, and he has been an author long enough to know, that a day lost is not easily regained.

At Burwood he was used to ponder quietly upon his coming task, as he strolled along the edges of the trout stream, and then throw all his gleanings upon paper by the sober lamplight; but if he stays at Felton Hall—and Auberon Slade has already come to the conclusion that, unless he wishes mortally to offend his father's old friend, he will be obliged to stay there, for a few days at least—he hardly sees how he can do otherwise—he knows that neither the time for peaceful reflection, nor for evening labour, will be his own.

It is a noisy, boisterous household, generally filled by the loud voice of Sir Lyster, or the shouting of his guests; the last place in the world that a busy man would choose to stay in.

Auberon Slade enlarges on this fact as he dashes off a hasty, angry letter to his father, begging to know why he did not leave it to him to say whether he desired the society of Sir Lyster Gwynne or not; and accusing the old man of having, by his inadvertence, placed him in a most unpleasant position, from which he foresees great difficulty in extricating himself with politeness.

The letter concludes with a request that his father or mother will send an epistle to Felton Hall in the course of a few days, requesting his return to Blankshire, as he has no intention of

remaining there beyond that space of time; his literary engagements (as Mr Slade might have premised, before plunging him in so awkward a dilemma) being far too numerous to be fulfilled in a house filled with company.

After having relieved his feelings in which manner, Auberon Slade pulls a lot of foolscap paper out of the bottom of his portmanteau, and, placing it before him, sits down to compose some verses, which he is pledged to send to a certain popular magazine by the end of the month. For our hero has reached that happy stage on the ladder of Fame, when his name, and the name of his contributions to the periodicals he elects to favour, are advertised in letters three times the size of those dedicated to less fashionable contributors; which fact, causing many well-meaning, but ignorant people, to suppose that his paper or poem must also be three times the length of any of the others, has been the means of much disappointment when, on the purchase of the magazine, a sonnet, consisting of eight lines, addressed to no one in particular, and touching upon no especial subject, has been found to be the only contribution under the thrilling signature of Auberon Slade.

But if the public, on the production of a few creditable lines, destitute of false quantities and glaring errors, will make a man "the rage," it must expect to see the value of his wares rise in his own estimation, as he has risen in that of itself.

And Auberon Slade, for this season at least, is decidedly "the rage," but whether deservedly so is another question. He is a very fair poet; and has a knack of breathing passionate ideas, in language as musical as pure, that goes home to human hearts; and has caused even his reviewers to acknowledge that there is real merit in his verses, and a future before him, if he chooses to work it out.

But Auberon Slade is only six-and-twenty; sanguine, and not a little conceited, and the danger is, lest he should consider that he has already done enough; that he could not do much better even if he tried; and rest contented with the praises he has won.

The disappointment that has already overtaken him has done him good in this respect—it has lowered his opinion of himself, if not of his verses; but no one that regarded him as he now sits, twisting the pen about in his hand, and dashing

off the first ideas that come into his head, with scarcely a reviewing thought, as if anything were good enough that emanated from him, could doubt that he requires to step further into the fiery furnace of affliction, before his confident nature is subdued, and the real metal that is in him purified for the world's use.

He is writing a sonnet upon "Woman's Eyes;" rather an abusive sonnet indeed, remembering the flashing orbs that so lately led him on, but to deceive him. But somehow he does not proceed very fast with his work; thoughts do not come quite so readily as usual; the heat is oppressive, and he feels strange in the unaccustomed room; added to which, whenever he commences to level his indignation at the perfidious orbs of the sex in question, the earnest eyes of Lady Gwynne, as he first saw them, seem to rise between the paper and himself, and forbid the wholesale condemnation.

"Very strange eyes," he muses, "so wonderfully changeable; one moment full of mirth, and the next with a yearning expression in them that is positively painful to contemplate. I wonder if she ever deceived a man as that jade deceived me! No; I couldn't believe it of her. There 's too much truth in her face. Besides, it 's always the women who stick up for beauties that turn out such"——

But what the women who stick up for beauties turn out in Mr Slade's estimation he had best keep to himself.

It certainly is not a day for steady application; the soft, warm air, laden with the scent of flowers, comes stealing in such a seductive manner through the open casement, and wandering over his hair and moustaches like a woman's lip; the crimson leaves of autumn creepers fluttering against the sill, sound like the rustling of a dress; and twin pears, dependent from one stalk, keep tapping on the upper panes as though they invited him to step outside and contemplate their beauties from another point of view.

Low murmurs, too, rise from the lawn beneath his window, mingled with the occasional shrill chatter of a child; until Auberon Slade, quite convinced that, for the present, inspiration has flown, deserts the foolscap and the inkstand—oh, recreant wooer!—and, advancing to the window, leans both his elbows on the sill, and gazes on the scene before him. How much more jolly and cool it looks, than he feels up there!

How he wishes he were an idle man, that he might go down and join them!

Under the shade of an old far-spreading walnut tree sits Lady Gwynne, a broad-brimmed hat upon her head, and a small green volume in her hand; whilst at her feet, Daisy, her only child, a troublesome elf of eight or nine years old, is vainly endeavouring to induce her kitten to submit quietly to be taught to read, by having its paw firmly grasped and drawn along the lines in her spelling-book; and seated on chairs beside her, are Emily Musgrave and two other girls, cousins of Lady Gwynne, whose fingers are employed in needlework, whilst their eyes are every now and then raised to the face of their hostess.

It is evident that she is reading to them, but what he cannot yet determine. But he feels that it is abominably hot weather, and he is so unaccustomed to compose by daylight, he does not believe he shall do a single stroke of work that morning.

Then he walks up to the table, tumbles over all his papers, decides that woman's eyes, and everything else that belongs to woman, are worn-out subjects, and he must think of something fresher! Only he never can evolve a new idea except when the house is silent, and he is quite alone. Finally, he returns to the window and takes up his old position. It is certainly much cooler to sit in a current of air.

Either the pears have ceased tapping on the window-pane, or Daisy's voice is more subdued; but he can hear perfectly well what Lady Gwynne is reading now. The first words that fall upon his ear act like a wicked charm—"I did not come to curse thee, Guinevere."

"Tennyson, by Jove!" and up starts Auberon Slade, as excited as a war-horse that hears the trumpet-call to battle, and prepares to rush downstairs. A reproachful thought does flash across his mind as he thrusts the virgin foolscap to one side, but he dismisses it peremptorily.

"Bother the work!" is his silent exclamation; "I can do twice as much by night as I can by day, and I shall feel more like myself to-morrow. No fellow on earth could write, with Tennyson being read aloud just outside his window. And she didn't read that line half so badly either. I wonder if she's got any taste for that sort of thing;" and in another

moment he is in a position to answer the question for himself. Or would be, that is to say, if Lady Gwynne would have the goodness to proceed with her occupation, instead of getting as red as a peony, and thrusting the "Idylls" behind her garden chair.

"O Mr Slade! I trust we have not disturbed you. I thought we were too far off for our voices to reach your window."

"And so you would have been, had I not purposely courted the pleasure of listening to them. But the idea of lying under this luxuriant shade, and hearing Tennyson read aloud, was too great a temptation to me. Pray go on, Lady Gwynne!"

And casting himself upon the grass beside Miss Daisy, Auberon Slade awaits the conclusion of Arthur's glowing speech.

But Lady Gwynne is scarcely equal to the occasion. She crimsons, if possible, deeper than she did before, and falters out that she cannot—really she cannot!

"Not before you," she concludes, with a nervous laugh.

Auberon Slade's expressive eyes look upward and backward at her blushing face.

"And why not before me, Lady Gwynne? Because I can scribble poetry is no reason why I should be able to read it. And, indeed, I doubt whether I could read it more appropriately than I heard you do, just now."

"How much did you hear?"

"One line—but that was quite sufficient; the reader who can give the proper intonation to that line, will be able to interpret the whole poem!"

"O Mr Slade! do you read it to us, then," exclaims Miss Musgrave, who would not be rendered too bashful to express her wishes, even by the presence of Tennyson himself.

"I would much rather hear Lady Gwynne read it," he answers, gravely.

Thus encouraged, Lady Gwynne, with rather a rueful countenance, picks up the fallen volume, and re-opens it at the page where she left off. She feels horribly nervous at reading poetry before Auberon Slade; but she is sensible enough to know that by a reiterated refusal she will only lower herself in his eyes; and that it is best to take him at his word, and believe he really wishes to hear her.

So, with rather a trembling voice, and amidst a battery of sly looks from her cousins and Emily Musgrave, she takes up the thread of the royal speech, and reads it to the end; forgetting herself, after a while, in the beauty of the words she utters, and throwing so much pathos into them, that she is startled by the round of unpremeditated applause that greets her conclusion.

"Bravo, Gwendoline! I never heard you read that poem so well before," bursts from her cousins; and Miss Musgrave declares that the presence of Mr Slade must have inspired her.

But he says nothing in the way of admiration, except a fervent "Thank you," as he takes the volume from her hands.

"Now you will really read to us—won't you?" she demands hurriedly, as, red with excitement, she bends towards him.

"Yes; do!" interrupts Emily Musgrave, "and then Lady Gwynne must repeat some of your poetry, Mr Slade! She knows it all by heart, and is always saying it to herself."

"*Emily!*" says Lady Gwynne, in a voice which sounds quite changed in its warning and reproach.

"Now, it's no good denying it, Lady Gwynne; besides, Mr Slade can only feel flattered by the compliment. I remember distinctly your telling me, last spring, that you always felt such pleasure in repeating it to yourself when you lay awake at night, because it tallied so exactly with your own feelings."

At this Auberon Slade, with all a poet's vanity, cannot help glancing upwards at the countenance of his hostess; but the distress he sees pictured there causes him to turn away as hastily, and occupy his attention with the green books scattered on the grass.

"May I read my favourite to you?" he says, with apparent indifference, as he turns over the pages of another volume by the same author.

No one answers him; and he dashes, without ceremony, into "Love and Duty." His voice is mellow and flexible to a degree, and his manner eminently dramatic without being stagey; so that all his listeners are deeply impressed, and a profound silence follows the last word of the poem.

"Could that be surpassed?" he asks, when the silence has continued long enough.

"Hardly!"

The reply comes from Emily Musgrave—but the tone is so subdued, he scarcely recognises it.

"That is *your* favourite also, is it not?" she continues, as she turns to Lady Gwynne.

At this, the reader looks up eagerly.

"Is it indeed? But I am not surprised that our tastes should agree."

Lady Gwynne smiles; but she does not answer him; her eyes are too full of tears, and he sees it. A dangerous ovation on the part of woman to genius!

CHAPTER VI.

A MATTER FOR THOUGHT.

But if Auberon Slade's vanity is excited by Lady Gwynne's tears in the morning, it receives a wholesome check from Lady Gwynne's frankness in the evening.

And this desirable result is brought about chiefly by the pertinacity of Sir Lyster in desiring her to sing a certain song.

She has been very gay to-night; for her, particularly gay, for she is experiencing, for the first time, the delight of being understood—of feeling that at last she has fallen in with some one who will not stare when she says what she thinks, nor call her honest impulses extravagance, and her reverent admiration rhapsody.

For so much she has gathered from the conversation which followed her morning interview with Auberon Slade. And the new pleasure brightens her eyes and plays in smiles out the corners of her mouth; she is *espiègle*, witty—at moments, almost sharp; she is bringing out a third phase of her character for the dissection of her guest, who, unknown to himself, is becoming hourly more interested in the contemplation of her various moods.

But Sir Lyster wants a song; and of course Sir Lyster will have it.

"What are you all chattering there for?" he exclaims, as he looks up from the game of piquet he is playing with Mr

Laurence, to where his wife and her companions are clustered together. "Can't you *do* something?"

"What shall we do?" inquires Lady Gwynne, as she turns her beaming face upon her husband.

"Sing or play. Why don't you sing us a song, Gwendoline?"

She rises at once, and moves towards the piano; but Mr Slade is there before her, to throw back the heavy cover of the instrument, and turn over the leaves at the wrong time, in the deliciously helpless manner of those who have not sufficient knowledge of music to ascertain when a performer has reached the last bar on the page.

Lady Gwynne is not a brilliant musician, but she plays and sings sufficiently well to please those who listen to her. To-night, however, she seems a little nervous, and the first chords struck are rather feebly pronounced. Yet not too much so, but that Sir Lyster discovers they are not the prelude to the air he wishes for.

"Not that," he says, authoritatively; "sing the song you sung us two nights ago—something about a 'secret.' What was it?"

Lady Gwynne reddens considerably.

"Oh! that was nothing—only some nonsense of my own. Let me sing the 'Fireside Song'—or Sullivan's 'Give.'"

"Not a bit of it! Let's hear all about the secret. I like the air; it's been ringing in my ears ever since."

Lady Gwynne twists about upon the music-stool, and wishes the air had been a quarter less attractive; the fact being that the music is her own, and the words are Auberon Slade's; and she feels shy of letting him see they hold so much attraction for her, even though it is months since she set them to her simple melody.

"Oh! do sing it, Lady Gwynne; it has such lovely words," chimes in Miss Musgrave.

"And if the music is your own, it will possess all the deeper interest for us," pleads the voice of the author by her side.

"Oh, very well—of course," she utters, in a fluttering manner, and thereupon begins to play and sing.

The verses are some of his least meritorious; dashed off in a hasty moment, and but little thought of afterwards; but

they are very simple and very pathetic,—and it would have been better if she had at once acknowledged they were his.

Of course he recognises them; watches, too, the glowing colour that mounts higher and higher in the singer's face, as she sees the recognition in his own; and draws a pleasing inference from the fact, for which she hates herself, and thinks that she despises him.

"You have heard the words before?" she says, confusedly, when she has finished.

Sir Lyster and Mr Laurence are busy over their game of piquet, and the other gentlemen are grouped about the young ladies at the further end of the room, so that they are, comparatively speaking, by themselves.

"I believe so," he replies; but the look which accompanies his answer displeases her. It is too conscious.

"Why can't you say 'yes' at once? Sir Lyster does not know them, because he never reads poetry; but every one else does, of course; and when I feel in the mood for murdering harmony, I generally compose the air first, and then search through all my books of verse, from Shelley downwards, until I find some stanzas that will fit it."

"Indeed! How very low you had to grovel before you accommodated yourself this time."

She laughs uneasily, but will not contradict his words.

"Oh! this melody is in very common measure, and easily suited. I know it is a horribly unorthodox plan; but I am no mistress of composition."

"Nor I a judge of musical orthodoxy; and so hoped the sentiment had first arrested your attention, and then the words set themselves unconsciously to music in the night."

Which so exactly describes the process by which Auberon Slade's stanzas have wedded themselves to the melody of Lady Gwynne, that she looks conscious, and has nothing to advance in denial of it. Only she wishes that he would turn his eyes another way.

"Emily, come and play us something. You are all terribly lazy to-night."

"Oh, not yet, Lady Gwynne, please! Mr Denison is teaching us such a capital method of telling fortunes by the cards."

She rises and goes towards them, Auberon Slade following in her wake.

"Do you believe in such rubbish, Mr Denison?"

"Scarcely, by this plan, which is only a game; but I have known wonderful things foretold by a friend of my mother's, the Comtesse d'Assi, who is some connection of, and learned her method from, the Italian lady whom Napoleon used to consult before engaging in any great political measure."

"How does she tell them?"

"By the cards, as I do,—only in a different manner."

"And you credit them?"

"They have often come true."

"Well, the only fortune I believe in," says Auberon Slade, "is the fortune we make or mar for ourselves. What men call destiny is usually the work of our own hands."

"Not always, my dear Slade," replies Major Calvert, laughing. "Sometimes it depends upon Government, in which case it is too often marred, and as my faith is pinned entirely upon that respectable body, I need not tell you it is but small."

"Please don't make such a dreadful chattering, Major Calvert. I cannot hear what Mr Denison is saying."

"You are very cold-hearted, Miss Musgrave," declares her oracle, as he turns the cards over and over in his hand, and tries to look profound. "You keep all your admirers at a distance by your cruel behaviour. There are two—no, three—at this present moment, who are on the verge of committing suicide from the effects of your reticence and impenetrability."

As soon as the laugh which this very improbable prophecy calls forth from all sides has subsided, Lady Gwynne exclaims—

"But I don't call that telling one's fortune. You are an impostor, Mr Denison, you only say what already exists. You might guess as much as that, from the sheer contemplation of your companion's face, without the aid of cards at all."

"Pardon me, Lady Gwynne, every one has not, like yourself, the faculty of reading characters at first sight."

"Lady Gwynne is celebrated for making lucky guesses in that respect," some one says to Auberon Slade.

"Indeed! can you tell my character, Lady Gwynne? You have had no opportunity of learning it."

She turns towards the eager face upraised to hers, and scans it for a moment. Then she says, thoughtfully—

"What 'luck' can there be in reading the character of a man or woman, rightly? To me it seems so difficult to mis-

understand it. There are no two faces alike,—nor two pair of hands."

"Do you draw much inference from a hand?" demands the poet, remembering, with secret satisfaction, his own shapely paw.

"Oh, I think so! they are so different. I always look to a woman's hand for her breeding, and her mouth for her temper. In your sex, manual exercise too often destroys the shape." And Lady Gwynne lays her hand upon the table as she speaks, and contemplates it a little lovingly. I have no desire to disguise her faults.

It is an aristocratic hand; not very small, perhaps, nor faultlessly moulded; but white as marble, with long taper fingers, perfect nails, and a firm, steadfast look about it,—like a hand that one would like to grasp when the damps of death are on one's brow, and the weakness of mortality commences to make itself felt.

Auberon Slade perceives it, and with a cry—almost of pleasure—starts forward and places his hand upon a line with hers.

A remarkable occurrence; the two hands, although belonging to different sexes, are almost precisely similar, and his companion sees it, as well as herself.

"How very much alike they are," he says, exultantly. "Are our characters the same?"

But Lady Gwynne withdraws her hand too quickly to express satisfaction at his movement.

"You forget, Mr Slade," she answers, coldly, "that you are a man, and I a woman; and that strength in me would become weakness in yourself."

"Tell me my character," he urges.

"Are you sure you would like to hear it?"

"Quite sure!—from your lips; though if you say that I am very weak, I'm afraid that I shall not believe it."

"I will not say anything I do not think," she answers, quietly, and turns her eyes upon the radiant countenance beside her; whilst every one, except the players at piquet, suspends his occupation to listen to her judgment.

"Strong powers of feeling," she goes on, presently, "acute sensitiveness, love of refinement and luxury, and a very equable temper. Am I right so far?"

"I think so—pray proceed."

"An affectionate disposition, but rather inclined to self-indulgence; a very tender heart"——

"By Jove! she is determined to turn his head," is the silent opinion of Major Calvert, who is standing close by. But his decision is made a moment too soon, though the eyes of Auberon Slade are beaming with self-satisfaction.

"But," continues Lady Gwynne, and in her "but" there is a tone which almost bears on sadness; "but with this, an impatience of suffering, Mr Slade; a want of perseverance; an inclination to begin things and leave them half completed; that, unchecked, bids fair to render all your virtues void."

There is a disposition to laugh on the part of the bystanders at this untoward conclusion, but something in the faces of Lady Gwynne and Auberon Slade makes them refrain.

"I have no doubt you are quite correct in that particular," exclaims the latter, although he looks anxious and uncomfortable at the decision of his hostess; "but I am afraid you give me too much credit for powers of feeling. I have none, Lady Gwynne; I am a philosopher, or a cynic, if you will; certainly a man blessed with too good an appetite and perfect a digestion to take the trouble of worrying myself about any thing that may happen in this world."

She glances at him quickly—

"You do not feel joy strongly, nor disappointment?"

She hits him hardly there, but he does not wince under it.

"I have seldom found anything in this life capable of affording me the first, and as to the second, I am a stranger to it."

"The world has used you too well, Slade," says Calvert; "it has spoiled you with flattery and incense; you will talk differently at some future day."

"Shall I, my dear fellow? Then I sincerely trust that day may never shine for me," he returns, with an assumption of complete indifference. He is horribly annoyed at the opinion his hostess has expressed of him, and hopes to pique her by a denial of her former statement. The assumption deludes Lady Gwynne, who takes it for earnest; and after gazing at his nonchalant appearance for a moment incredulously, turns away to another part of the room, quite determined never again to evince the slightest interest in Auberon Slade.

"He is not at all the man I took him for," she thinks, with just a shade of vexation. "He is as conceited as any empty-headed puppy about town, and I wish I had never affected sufficient interest in him to read his character. He will probably think to repay my condescension by an increase of familiarity. But he is much mistaken if he imagines I would permit him to do so."

So that her manner towards her new guest for the rest of the evening is very cool and indifferent; and he perceives the change, and is made, not exactly unhappy by it, but ill at ease, and more determined than ever to leave Felton Hall upon the first occasion.

But could Lady Gwynne have seen him when, in the solitude of his own room, he leans both his elbows on the table, and thrusts his fingers through his hair, and stares mechanically at the bed-curtains, she would have relented having dismissed him with so cold a bow.

He is really unhappy now; not at what she said, nor that she should have said it, but because in his heart he feels it to be true.

"Impatient of suffering—unpersevering—and self-indulgent," he mutters to himself. "Can it really be the case; and has this woman, a perfect stranger to me and my past life, read my character more plainly than I ever read it for myself?"

As he ponders, the remembrance of great designs sketched out and left in embryo, of noble projects unachieved, and visions of amendment still to be put in execution, flit across his brain, and leave it troubled.

"It is true that I have done but little as yet," he thinks, "but I am young, and life still holds so much enjoyment for me. When I have somewhat palled of its pleasures, I shall have more time to consider how best to benefit my generation."

Too much enjoyment! and too much love for it! That is just what her ready wit discovered. Is it possible that at his age one can enjoy life too much?

He muses on the luxury of his habits, and those of the society he keeps—the little time he gives to thought and study—the large leisure he devotes to fashion—the aptitude with which he casts aside business for the least temptation

drawing him the other way—the disappointment into which this tendency betrayed him.

Ay! that *was* a disappointment! at the moment sharp and piercing as a two-edged sword, dividing joints and marrow; the mere memory of which can make him shudder, even at humiliation that is past.

Impatient under suffering! As Auberon Slade recalls the wild, unhallowed period that succeeded that great pain, he is ready to acknowledge that, somehow, Lady Gwynne knows him better than he knows himself.

"A very remarkable woman!" he soliloquises, as he lights a last cigar, by the opened casement; "one moment as soft and dependent as a little child, and the next, keen and penetrating as a detective officer; rather determined, too, in her way, and with any amount of feeling. How she could love, too, if that curved open mouth of hers tells truth. I wonder, by the way, if she has ever had any scope for exercising the talent. Hardly, I should imagine,—at any rate, with such a blockhead as Sir Lyster. Well, I wish she had not discovered this confounded weakness of mine, or rather fancied she had discovered it. For I am not weak, or wanting in perseverance—by George! I'm not—see how I worked all through last winter—and I'll prove it to her, by finishing my poem before I leave the Hall. My lady shall not find me wasting my precious time again, by reading to her beneath the walnut trees."

And casting aside the end of his cigar with every appearance of impatience, Auberon Slade retires to his rest.

CHAPTER VII.

LEFT TO HERSELF.

The morning reflection does not disperse the evening resolution, which (as subsequent events will determine) is rather a remarkable occurrence in the life of our hero; and he sticks to it manfully also, during two days, for which lengthened period he absents himself religiously during working hours, not once showing his face in the garden, or even downstairs,

to the intense disgust of the younger members of the female community, who, as Miss Musgrave remarks, "can't bear a creature who has had his head so turned by flattery that no one is good enough for him."

At the end of that time, however, as Lady Gwynne is passing though the hall after breakfast, she hears his voice from the upper story.

"I say! look here! can you get me some more ink?"

"Mr Slade! is that you?"

"Lady Gwynne!"—in a voice of horror—"is it possible I was addressing you? I am so shocked; I thought it was one of the servants, and I have broken my bell."

"Can I get you anything?"

"Oh, no! pray don't mention it! It is only that I have used up all my ink; I will come downstairs and fetch some for myself.

But, as he reaches the middle of the broad flight, she is already ascending with the ink-bottle in her hand, and they enter his sitting-room together.

It is a pretty little nook which has been allotted to his use, all trimmed with green and white—a lady's boudoir, in fact, besprinkled with fragile ornaments and pictures, suggestive of innocence and peace, in the midst of which the world-worn man looks as incongruous as a snake reposing upon daisies.

She fills his china inkstand carefully, and then halts by the table for a moment, thoughtfully regarding the mass of papers scattered on its surface, whilst he looks down upon the rich border of her dress, and sighs, though very softly, to himself; the womanly presence making him understand the void that has existed in his chamber theretofore.

"I hope that you are comfortable here, and have everything you want," she says, with all the anxiety of a hospitable mind.

"Everything, thank you! Nothing could be more convenient or luxurious. In fact, I begin quite to dread returning to my dull chambers in town."

"There is no necessity for you to do so until you feel inclined. What a mass of writing! Have you done all that since you have been here?"

"Not quite all, but the greater part, and that within the last few days. Although Lady Gwynne *does* consider me so

idle and unpersevering," he adds, with an upward glance that is half deprecating, and half sly.

Poor Lady Gwynne is one big blush.

"You know that I could only tell you what the contour of your face and head suggested to my mind. But it is not necessary we should prove all that nature intended us to be; that would indeed be a frightful destiny. The worst inclinations may be overcome; and in your case, the foibles that I mentioned must at the least have been largely fought against, before your name could have attained the place in literature that it has done."

"Don't lay that flattering unction to my soul," he answers, frankly; "I confess that a disposition to commence things, and then cast them on one side, is my most common failing. Indeed, it is an effort to me to finish anything, even the shortest poem."

She likes his frankness, but she looks grave at his admission.

"Then I should make a point, in your case, of never putting anything aside, even, as you say, the briefest sonnet, until it is completed."

"Ah, if I had your resolution or your decided spirit always at hand to warn me, I should do greater things than I shall ever be capable of now."

He delivers himself of this aphorism in such a tone of despondency, that her soft, foolish heart is touched.

"My dear Mr Slade, what a treasonable speech! You have a mother and sisters, have you not?"

"Any quantity of them."

"And would they not warn you if they imagined you required it? They must be very ambitious for your sake, and proud of what you have already accomplished."

"My dear Lady Gwynne, it is the greatest mistake in this world to judge the feelings of others by our own. My mother has a copy of my book of ballads, I believe, lying on the drawing-room table; but I doubt if she, or my sisters, have ever looked into it. I am quite sure they could not repeat a line that it contains, and as to considering them worth being set to music"——

But at this mention of the predilection for them she has herself evinced, Lady Gwynne colours again, and looks down uneasily, and Auberon Slade stops short in his oration.

She has not been exactly cool in her demeanour towards him since that evening, but she has been less cordial than at first, and more disposed to seek the company of Major Calvert, or any other of her guests. She was a little bit afraid that she had gone too far with Auberon Slade; that she had appeared too conscious in his presence, and, though unwittingly, had paid too high a tribute to his undoubted genius; and, like all modest women, she is sensitive, and in danger now of retreating too far in the opposite direction. And her guest has perceived the change, and it has given him pain.

"Don't let me think," he continues, softly, "that you regret a circumstance that afforded me the keenest pleasure."

"It is a little thing to afford you pleasure."

"A little thing to know that you appreciate my motives—that you can enter into my thoughts and make them your own? O Lady Gwynne! if you say that with sincerity, you cannot know how seldom in this world we meet with sympathy. Many have congratulated, more have flattered me, but it is of very few that I can truly say, 'we think together.'"

"Your poetry has always given me pleasure," she admits, though half unwillingly. "I fancy that I can understand it better than that of most people. Despair and lamentation is altogether out of my line; so is the exuberance of joy, for I have never known any violent grief, and my life has passed as tranquilly as a summer day. But that yearning for companionship, which you so often express—that intense longing for—for"——

"For sympathy," interrupted her hearer, eagerly; "for another soul to speak to yours; to interpret its desires before it utters them; to keep peace when it wishes to be silent, and to barter thought when the inclination for speech arises; in fact, you yearn to find another self."

"And why not add that I sigh for an impossibility? No two persons in this world are alike."

"But there are many souls fitted to be companions to each other. Else why should we feel in reading the words of strangers that they convey a correct impression of our own thoughts? Take some of our modern lights, for instance—Tennyson, Longfellow, Owen Meredith—with how many thousand souls do their souls not throb in sympathy?"

He is growing sentimental now, but her light laugh recalls him.

"But how would they all get on in the flesh together, Mr Slade?"

"Well, I hardly know what to say about that; except that, if they did not agree, it would be, that either the poets had written what they did not feel, or their readers had mistaken imagination for reality. But there is no such key to a man's heart as his verse, Lady Gwynne, and no such refining process for our own souls as the study of poetry."

"Did you read much in that way?"

"A great deal. I am still but a tyro in the art, you know—a mere student. I hope to do much better than I have yet done."

He halts, expecting her to deny the possibility of such an occurrence; but the only words that drop from her lips are a confirmation of the statement.

"Of course! you ought to, at your age."

He doesn't quite like the answer, but he swallows it meekly.

"What age do you suppose me to be?"

"About my own—six-and-twenty."

"I shall be six-and-twenty in December."

"There is only a month's difference between us, then. And you are at the commencement of life, and I seem to have nearly reached its close."

"Lady Gwynne!"

"Oh, you don't know how old it makes a woman feel to be a mother! Everything seems over then, except looking forward to one's grandchildren."

They both laugh at this, and she takes the opportunity to move towards the door.

"Oh, are you going? I wish I might come with you?"

"You can do so, if you like. The girls and I are sitting in the morning-room to-day. It is too hot to venture out of doors."

"But may I bring this ponderous volume with me? I have been studying dramatic verse of late."

"What is it? Shakespeare! Oh, you know that we shall be pleased to hear you read, without fishing for a compliment beforehand."

And so, both feeling unusually light-hearted and gay at

having made up their little difference, they descend together to the presence of the other ladies, and spend a charming hour in reading and conversation, before the gong summons them to luncheon.

Having found his time pass so pleasantly, Auberon Slade ponders on the reason; and coming to the conclusion that it is far easier to fix one's attention on the matter in hand, when reading aloud than when reading to one's self, steals sneaking downstairs again the following day with Shakespeare under his arm, and a humble request to be re-admitted to the morning-room.

Lady Gwynne slightly demurs; that is, she hesitates, and is not quite certain whether she intends to sit there, or in the garden. But Auberon Slade is equal to all emergencies, and the girls are vehemently opposed to doing anything but remaining where they are, so that their hostess is compelled through politeness to yield her wishes to theirs, and Shakespeare is carried by universal acclamation. Carried, not only for that day, but several succeeding ones, until more than a week has elapsed since Auberon Slade first read aloud to them beneath the walnut trees. Then a *contretemps* arises, hitherto unforeseen, and threatening to produce consequences, inconvenient, if not serious.

Sir Lyster wishes to rid the house of Emily Musgrave and his wife's cousins, for the first of September is close at hand, and he has invited several new guests to Felton Hall; and Lady Gwynne opposes the measure with spirit. The period originally agreed upon for the young ladies' visit is not expired, and she has an innate dread of being left without female companionship, and begs that she may at least retain one of them.

"Stuff and nonsense!" ejaculated Sir Lyster, in his sweet, re-assuring manner; "what on earth can you want a lot of stupid, useless girls about the place for, that can do nothing but sniggle and flirt?"

"They amuse the gentlemen. However shall we get through the evenings without them?"

"Much better than with them. They don't play cards or billiards, or any sensible game; and only keep the men dangling after them, when they would much rather be in my smoking-room."

"My dear Lyster! you will be overheard if you speak so loud."

"Don't care who hears me. All the better if they do, and take the hint to clear out. They've been hanging on here for a couple of months, and we shall want their rooms. I've invited Sir John and Lady Cleaver here, and my Uncle Hassell writes me word to-day that he and his wife will be down the beginning of the week."

"I shall have no companions when they are gone," says Lady Gwynne, in a tone of vexation.

"You will have Lady Cleaver and my Aunt Hassell. What can you want more?"

"My dear Lyster! Lady Cleaver never leaves her room till luncheon-time; and your aunt is so nervous amongst strangers that she takes all her meals alone!"

"All the better. Who wants to talk to old women? You will not be bothered by their company."

"Yes! of course, but"—— She is not thinking of the stranger upstairs, nor of the probability of their being thrown in each other's way; and yet an instinct, not to be accounted for, yet perfectly definable (which is oftener observable in women than men, and perhaps bestowed on them in common with the other lower animals, to make up for their lack of reasoning powers), urges her to make another effort to retain one at least of her young guard of honour. "Might not Emily stay? She is always happy here, you know, and very useful to me. Let Minnie and Emma go home as you wish, and Emily remain for a month or six weeks longer. The house will be empty again by that time."

"No! it is impossible! I tell you that I want their bedrooms."

"I could have a sofa-bedstead put in my dressing-room for Emily. She is a good-natured girl, and does not mind a little inconvenience."

But the nobler animal, fully conscious of its mental and physical powers, is determined to have its own way.

"Hang it all! Am I not master in my own house? I've told you once already that I wish them to go, all three of them, and you stand there twaddling about sofa-bedsteads and such rubbish. I wish the girls *to go:* that's quite sufficient; and so now, let's hear no more about it."

Consequently he does hear no more about it, and by the end of the next week Lady Gwynne's cousins and friend are gone, and she finds herself through the long summer days—save for the two old women who never appear till dinner-time—virtually alone.

Except that Mr Slade, who must work harder than ever now, if he is to take any recreation in the shooting season, brings down his business, whether of writing or reading, into her sitting-room each morning, and she does not know how to prevent his doing so. He says he can compose so much better if some one is sitting in the same room with him.

CHAPTER VIII.

ETERNAL FRIENDSHIP.

It is about this time that old Mr Slade, obedient to the peremptorily-expressed desire of his son—of whom he stands just a little in awe—sends a letter to Felton Hall, to say that Auberon's presence is urgently needed in Blankshire, on business connected with the estate, which will eventually be his own. And Auberon Slade tosses the epistle on one side, and asks his father, by return of post, why on earth he neglected to comply with his demands at the proper time.

"I have been expecting your letter for the last week," he writes, with considerable irritation; "it might have been of some use to me then, it is not the least now. I have been at Felton Hall more than a fortnight, making use of the house as though it were my own, and I cannot run away just as the shooting season is at hand. Besides, Sir Lyster has invited two or three men expressly to meet me, and I am quite sure that he would take my departure at this moment as a want of politeness to himself. You have entirely upset my plans again by your delay, but I must make the best of it, and will take good care to look after myself in future."

Having despatched which filial admonition, Auberon Slade resigns himself with Spartan firmness to the horrors of his lot.

He is right in surmising that Sir Lyster Gwynne would take his defalcation at this particular juncture as a personal

affront. Sir Lyster does not like Auberon Slade; it is hardly possible that two men, differing so widely in their preferences and pursuits, should amalgamate in common life; but spite of himself, he cannot help admiring him; and it flatters his vanity to retain so cogent an attraction under the roof of Felton Hall.

For if Auberon Slade and Lyster Gwynne cannot agree in all things, it is not the case with Auberon Slade and other men. He is essentially a man's companion; full of pleasant worldly chatter, original anecdotes, and smart sayings, that can be carried from one ear to another, and repeated with the greatest advantage. He is an inveterate smoker, and keen sportsman; can talk over the prospects of the season as ably as he can enlarge upon the doctrinal disputations of the day; and discuss the merits of stable or kennel with as much facility as he can quote poetry or prose to suit any topic that may happen to be brought forward.

His is, in fact, a versatile taste and genius, which is half the secret, perhaps, of his success amongst women; for, whatever men may imagine to the contrary, that much-abused sex seldom likes them any the better for hanging about the drawing-room when their companions are in the hunting-field. A woman likes a man because he is not a woman; notwithstanding which, when men, having fulfilled the duties of their station, can contrive to mingle a little feminine softness in their social intercourse, they become doubly dangerous animals to be left alone with.

Auberon Slade has this dangerous gift in perfection, and though Lady Gwynne will not permit him to talk on indifferent subjects during the hours of study, he has contrived to have several strolls with her after dinner, through the syringa and rose-scented labyrinth of the shrubbery; and to find out that their opinions tally in most instances, and that where they differ he has little trouble in bringing her round to his own.

Indeed, those walks (whilst Lady Cleaver and Mrs Hassell take their after-dinner nap in the drawing-room, and Sir Lyster and his guests are prosing or debating, as the humour takes them, over their bottles in the dining-room) have come to be a recognised institution by these two, who have almost arrived at the point of calling each other friends; and although Miss Daisy, in her white skirts and fluttering ribbons, is usually hanging on her mother's arm, her presence is not a sufficient

check upon their conversation to render the fascinating intercourse innocuous. It is the first of September, and from nine o'clock in the morning—save for the three ladies and the child—Felton Hall has been empty of its inmates, and, as Lady Gwynne considers it, excessively dull.

It is the first day that Auberon Slade has absented himself between breakfast and luncheon, and she misses him terribly. The pleasant little room in which they have been accustomed to sit together, looks so bare and deserted that she cannot stay there; she so much misses the sound of his rich, mellow voice, as he reads out some striking portion of the poem he is studying; or the bright, soft look of his eyes as she raises her own, and finds that they are fixed upon her.

She misses all this, with a kind of sinking, cold regret, and walks out of the room impatiently; and yet never guesses why the absence of Auberon Slade should be of any moment to her.

Daisy is hard at work with her governess; and fat Lady Cleaver is, as usual, in bed: there is no resource but to join her Aunt Hassell in the drawing-room. Aunt Hassell is a withered, half-dead, little woman, who jumps if the door is opened suddenly, and talks with a nervous tremble in her voice. She has a nature with which Lady Gwynne cannot sympathise, and of which she is, at times, rather intolerant; but a yearning to talk to some one has come over her, and *faute de mieux*, she must talk to Mrs Hassell.

The little, half-dead aunt has not much to say, not being in the habit of making pertinent or original remarks upon any subject; but she knits, and trembles, and replies in monosyllables, and has nearly exhausted her listener's patience, until the conversation somehow works itself round to Auberon Slade.

"How do you like him, aunt?" asks Lady Gwynne: a question, by the way, which she has become very fond lately of putting—*sub rosa*—to her various guests.

"Oh, I like him well enough, my dear, what I have seen of him. But I think he ought to take more care of himself."

Mrs Hassell's remarks, when she does venture on any, always culminate in some unaccountable manner on the question of health.

"Take care of himself," echoes her niece; "but why—he is not ill?"

Mrs Hassell's head wags backward and forward oracularly, like the head of a toy mandarin. It is her only answer; and at first sight it seems a startling one.

"What do you mean, aunt?" says Lady Gwynne, in a tone of fluttering alarm.

"My dear, that young man is consumptive; he ought never to remain out after the dew has fallen. He will not last more than three or four years at the outside."

"But who told you so?" in a very low voice.

"My daughter, Mrs Jerrard, knows the family; they live close together in Blankshire. His sister died in a decline last year, and I am told that his health was very much affected by his disappointment."

"What disappointment?"

"What! have you never heard? I thought all the world knew that Mr Slade was engaged to Lady Mary St Maur, and that she jilted him! Very badly she behaved, I am told; and that the young man fell quite ill from vexation at her conduct, and was ordered away from London in consequence. And it will have a great effect upon his health without doubt; for a disease like his is always, more or less, affected by the state of the mind."

"But are you sure he is consumptive?"

"My dear, no one could look at him and doubt it. Have you not seen how pale he is in the mornings, and flushed at night? That is always a symptom; besides, Jane tells me that all the family are the same, and that no one supposes that any of them will live to reach old age. Mr Slade coughed a good deal last evening, after he came in from walking with you. Did you not hear him?"

"Yes! yes—I did."

Mrs Hassell does not observe the husky voice in which these words are uttered, nor notice the sudden shadow that falls across her niece's face.

Good old soul! how should she? *She* has never been troubled with dangerous attentions during her married life, nor encountered the smallest temptation to be disloyal to her Hassell. British virtue has doubtless a great deal to be proud of in her morality, and a very plain physiognomy still more. Anyway, she does not recognise the feeling, and would certainly not sympathise with it if she did.

What has a wedded heart in common with irregular pulsation, or a wedded cheek with burning, painful blushes? They ought to have forgotten how such things are done.

"Where are you going, my dear?" demands Mrs Hassell, presently, as Lady Gwynne, rising from her seat, moves slowly towards the door.

"Only to see Daisy; it wants but an hour to luncheon-time; we shall meet then,"—and she is gone.

She feels as though it would be a comfort to her, at that moment, to be assured of Daisy's health and spirits—to look upon her blooming face, and strong, stout limbs, and feel happy in the thought that sickness and death are not likely to step in here, and rob her of so valued a possession. And she stays by the child till luncheon-time, watching her rough movements, and listening to her sturdy voice (for Miss Daisy is by no means of the sylph-like order of children) with positive relief; and sending up, every other moment, a little prayer of thanks that there is no scourge hanging over her youthful beauty, no hereditary taint to fear for her, and that she may rest with as much confidence as is permitted to mortality, on the hope of seeing her daughter attain perfected womanhood.

But when the melancholy mid-day meal is concluded, and Lady Gwynne is once more released from the society of Mrs Hassell, she wanders out of doors, and paces up and down beneath the walnut trees, and indulges in a profound melancholy. There is no Daisy now to divert her thoughts, and make her thankful (that young person having been again captured by her governess, and carried off a prisoner to the schoolroom), and she muses in a vague manner on the transitory nature of this world's happiness, until she succeeds in making herself thoroughly miserable.

So, lost in a reverie, she is standing, with the tears thickly gathered in her eyes, when some one steals up behind her on the grass, and says, "Boh!" right in her ear.

Of course she starts, and of course she laughs; it is only natural she should laugh to find that Auberon Slade can think of no more dignified manner in which to announce his presence to his hostess.

"O Mr Slade! how you startled me! How can you be such a baby! Are they all here?"

"No one but myself. After having walked over about a couple of dozen fields this morning, they propose to take as many more this afternoon. But I am quite done up; I could go no further," and he puts his gun and shot-belt down upon the grass as he speaks.

"Have you had good sport?"

"Very fair. They'll have made a capital bag by this evening; Sir Lyster and Calvert appear indefatigable. I shot a couple of dozen brace myself."

"And you are very tired."

"Rather so. Such a sedentary life as I lead unfits one for violent exercise; but I shall get used to it after a day or two. How cool it is out here. Come and sit down!" and as she complies with his request by taking possession of one of the garden chairs, he flings himself full length upon the ground beside her.

"Oh! don't sit there," she exclaims, quickly, in a voice which, despite of herself, is full of entreaty. "I am sure the grass must be damp, there was a shower last night."

"Well, what of that?" in a tone of amusement; "it won't hurt me if it is. Nothing ever hurts me."

"But you have a cough," reproachfully.

"Where?" as though a cough might be taken all over the body.

"You coughed last night; I heard you."

"Oh, that is nothing, only a tickling in my throat. I always have that in the evenings."

"But you should be more careful indeed, Mr Slade; coughs are such dangerous things, and you are rather used to them, I believe."

"Never had a bad one in my life."

"But—but—your family generally are delicate, are they not?"

"As strong as horses, every one of them. Who told you to the contrary, Lady Gwynne?"

She is rather confused now, but she blunders on womanfully.

"I heard—I understood—that is to say, my Aunt Hassell informed me just now, that Miss Slade—your sister that"——

"My poor sister whom we lost last year?" he says, interrogatively.

"Yes. Mrs Hassell has been led to understand that she died in a consumption; and I know it is catching, and runs

in families, and I thought perhaps—indeed, my aunt told me"——

"That we were a doomed race; and that frightened you."

The voice in which he ends this sentence is a lowered voice. Intuitively his eyes turn to seek her own, but the search is unsuccessful; Lady Gwynne's eyes are looking quite in an opposite direction, and only one part of a very crimson cheek is visible.

"Were you thinking of that when I surprised you here just now?"

No answer. O Lady Gwynne! why do you not give a quick, indignant denial to his question?

"Now I will tell you what are the real facts of the case," says Auberon Slade, when he has gazed at her averted face for as long as decency will permit. "My poor sister died of sheer debility, the consequence of an operation which had been performed on her two years before, and from the effects of which she had never recovered, and there was no symptom of consumption about her case; neither have I ever heard of any member of our family dying of that disease."

"People do exaggerate so terribly," murmurs Lady Gwynne, already heartily ashamed that she has alluded to the subject.

"As for myself, I believe there has seldom been a stronger man than I am, or one more capable of enduring fatigue. Thinness is no proof of debility, and it would require the constitution of a horse to go through what I went through last season."

"But you knocked up under it!" she answers, quickly.

"Yes! but more from the effects of mental, than physical exertion; partly also from worry. As Mrs Hassell appears to be so conversant with my family diseases, she may also have proved competent to enlighten you concerning my private affairs."

"O Mr Slade! pray don't mention it; it is no concern of mine."

"Not if you could comfort me?"

"That is out of my power."

"I am not so sure of it. O Lady Gwynne! if you knew how during the last few months I have longed for a sympathetic heart to which I could tell the troubles of my own, you would not be so quick, perhaps, to say you cannot comfort me."

"But your mother!—your sisters—you have them."

"My *mother!* my *sisters!*" with a most uncomplimentary emphasis on each term; "Lady Gwynne! if you had seen my mother and sisters only once, you would never have made that suggestion! Mind! I don't want to say anything against them; they are most excellent women in their way; but as for going and telling them about my love affairs——Well! You have not seen them, and that is your only excuse."

"Then it *was* a love affair," says Lady Gwynne, as she digs the point of her garden parasol deep into the turf.

"Oh, yes! All the world knows that! She was so beautiful!" (warming with his subject) "no man who saw her, hardly, could have helped loving her. Lady Mary St Maur!—you must have seen her photograph surely, in the shop windows in town."

"I don't remember that I observed it; but I know the name, of course. She attended the same Drawing-Room as myself this year."

"Did you see her?"—eagerly.

"No! I didn't"—coldly; but Auberon Slade is too engrossed to see the coldness.

"Oh! she is a most glorious creature; with big blue eyes and a perfect veil of golden hair—and the richest colouring—more like a goddess than a woman;—and when she first led me on to believe she cared for me, I could not think it possible such good fortune could be mine."

"Well!"——

"Well!"—(with a deep sigh)—"the ending of it is no secret. I suppose she was either too young to know her own mind, or she grew tired of me; but our engagement was broken off in a month."

"Too young to know her own mind—why! she was one-and-twenty in May! everybody can tell that from the Peerage," interrupts Lady Gwynne, scornfully. Lenient as she is in general to the foibles of her own sex, she cannot resist casting this small stone at the supposed guilelessness of Lady Mary St Maur.

"Well, it little signifies—it comes all the same to me in the end. She threw me over—if that phrase pleases you better—and it is small consolation to me to believe her not free from blame. Because, you see, I was very fond of her."

There is so much simple pathos and humility in this last confession, and the voice sounds so unlike the *débonnair*, "devil-may-care" voice of Auberon Slade, that her tender, womanly compassion is aroused in his behalf; and the little unworthy jealousy retreats into the background.

"You suffered," she says, softly.

"*Suffered!* If you could have seen me when I was at last convinced that all was over between us, you would indeed say that I had suffered. I did not think it possible that any one could suffer so much! But I have lived through it, you see," —with a careless laugh.

"Poor fellow!" The pitiful tones are not so low but that he catches them.

"Oh, how sweet it is to hear you say that! how very, very sweet to know that some one feels for me! If I could only make you understand how passionately I have longed for sympathy in this trial."

"You will always have my sympathy, Mr Slade."

"I believe it!—but I want more; I want your affection! I want to know that I have a friend who cares for me, into whose bosom I may pour all my troubles without reserve; who will not get tired of me when I am in the vein for talking, nor interpret my silence as a lack of interest. Tell me, Lady Gwynne! Have I found such a friend? Is this the secret of the sympathy between us?"

"I believe that we are friends, and yet"——

"You think there may be danger in such an intimacy. In some cases there might be, but not in ours. We are above the herd."

"With us it will be soul to soul—and nothing less," she whispers.

"And nothing less! How like you to say 'and nothing *less*.' An ordinary woman would have said, 'and nothing *more*.' We shall understand each other. I knew it from the first."

"And you will have no secrets from me?"

"None! nor you from me; though our secrets promise to be very commonplace henceforward. We are neither of us in the first passionate flush of youth—for both of us, happily perhaps, that time is past, never to be recalled. And as for myself, I tell you candidly it is impossible I should ever love

again as I have done. The power of feeling is dead in me; and that is what I meant the evening that you read my character, when I told you that I was a cynic."

Why is there just the slightest shadow of disappointment apparent in her quick retort?

"Of course! and so much the better, as you say, for both of us, that it should be so. Love seldom brings anything but trouble in this world."

"You are right! There is no love to be compared to a true and honest friendship. I cannot tell you how much happier I feel since I have spoken to you about this trouble. Your sympathy seems to have lightened my breast of half its load. That is the penalty you will have to pay for my confidence. You must bear half my troubles for me."

How she smiles upon his upturned face!

"And so I will, most gladly. But have you really never spoken to any one of this before?"

"*Never!* I do not know any one but yourself to whom I would speak of it."

"But you know very little of me," shyly; "how can you tell that I am trustworthy?"

"I will take it on credit. I was certain from the first hour I met you, that we should be friends, and that your friendship would be such an enjoyment to me as I have never experienced in this world before. A true affection, without passion, and without reserve—what feeling on this earth can equal it? It is not of this earth, it is a foretaste of heaven! O Lady Gwynne! you have made me feel so proud, so happy, to possess the assurance of your sympathy, and the hope of being admitted to your confidence."

"It is I that should be proud," she answers, "to think that such a man as you, who have exchanged ideas with some of the profoundest intellects in Europe, should choose a simple woman like myself to be the depositary of your most private thoughts."

"The marvel is, that you should take the trouble to be interested in them. I shall work with twice as good a heart now, when I remember that your eye will criticise my verse, and correct the emanations of my ungoverned spirit by the purer impulses of your own."

"You expect too much from me."

"I expect you to be all that you have promised—my guide, and counsellor, and friend! There is no such influence for the benefit of man as the influence of a high-souled and right-minded woman. I wish I could believe that I should never take a step in the future that was not taken by your advice, and sanctioned by your approval."

She has never been spoken to in this manner by any one in the world before, and her heart glows with a new and irrepressible delight, which her features take no trouble to conceal.

"It is a settled thing, then, Lady Gwynne, is it not?" he says, gaily, in conclusion. "We two have sworn eternal friendship, which, being interpreted, means, that you are to scold me whenever you see a good opening for it, and I am not to sit on the damp grass when you tell me not."

"Oh, please don't allude to that any more; it was so silly of me."

"Dear Lady Gwynne! if you knew how sweet your anxiety made you appear in my eyes, you would not say so. Silly, was it? It is such silliness, my friend, that makes me feel at the present moment as if I could never be unhappy in this world again!"

CHAPTER IX.

DANGEROUS CONFIDENCES.

THE first dressing-bell has sounded for the Felton dinner, and yet Auberon Slade, without making any attempt at progression in his toilet, leans idly from his bedroom window, thinking over the conversation he has just held with Lady Gwynne. He feels so happy and light-hearted in the retrospection of it, that he is astonished at himself. It is chiefly his vanity that is excited by her condescension and evident approval, but he confuses the feeling with another, greater, if more reprehensible; and his heart flutters beneath the pleasing consciousness of having had the power to awaken a reciprocal feeling in the heart of a woman, as incapable of immodesty as she would be of deception.

But Auberon Slade is a man of the world, who has mixed much with men and women, and noted the innumerable little means by which, when in pursuit of pleasure, they strive to silence the whispers of their conscience. He has no belief in what is called platonic affection; and in the midst of his exultation a troubled doubt creeps every now and then across his mind, as he cannot divest it of the notion that he is on the road to fall in love with Lady Gwynne, and wonders to himself how it will all end. No thought of possible future guilt annoys him, for his love is yet too young and pure not to be held sacred even by the lowest portion of his nature; but he foresees trouble, and perplexity—perhaps a bitter sorrow—and yet he has not strength of mind to fly whilst there is time.

"She is too good," he muses, "too innocent (absurdly innocent indeed for a woman of her age) to dream of any evil consequence arising from our friendship; and whilst her suspicions sleep, I can hold even my thoughts in check. A look of consciousness from her eyes would be a spark to kindle the whole train, and blow us—Heaven knows where. But the powers of hell themselves would shrink abashed before so pure a gaze as hers. Her fearlessness of harm, her perfect trust in me, must prove her safeguard; and in her position as a married woman, she is as sacred in my eyes as I should wish my wife to be in those of other men. Ah! if Fate had only allotted such a woman to me, so gay of heart and deep in feeling, so bold to censure and quick to understand, I might have been a very different fellow to what I am. Well! it 's no use thinking about it," with a sigh; "she 's not mine, and she never will be—the world is full of such cross purposes—and I must be thankful to have such a woman for my friend. It is not every man that can say as much as that."

But here the clanging of the second dinner-bell startles Auberon Slade from his reverie, into the conviction that he has not yet commenced to dress, and must send down an apology to Lady Gwynne to account for the delay in his appearance.

Meanwhile, very different thoughts have been coursing through the mind of the other contractor of this new bond of friendship. She also has been light-hearted upon retrospection, singing gaily, and smiling to herself with secret satisfac-

tion. But no doubts have mingled with her joy, or they would have dispersed it. Her light-heartedness has been the light-heartedness of a child, for Auberon Slade does her no less than justice in his estimation of her purity of spirit and intention. Lady Gwynne is essentially an innocent woman—innocent, not because of her ignorance, for she is perfectly well aware that this world's heritage is sin and shame, and that to err is not the exception, but the rule. But she is guileless with respect to fearing, or even contemplating, such a destiny for herself. Other women may go wrong—God pity and forgive them!—but she, the wife of an easy-going husband, the mother of such a treasure as Daisy! that *she* could ever be led astray, or even look upon another man with any feeling but that of the purest friendship, would be an incomprehensibility to her, a thing not be understood; to try to understand which would be a species of disloyalty to the man she had sworn to keep to, and to honour.

She is blinder than Auberon Slade in this respect, but her blindness renders her less culpable. He, seeing the possible danger, attempts to brave it; she treads a path which inexperience causes her to regard as safe. They both trust to themselves too much, and to Heaven too little, but they trust in different ways.

As to my heroine, at this juncture she has no idea but that what Auberon Slade has offered to her she is free and able to accept,—an honest friendship!

Has he not told her that from his hands she has nothing to fear? And so closely, though unknowingly, has he already wound himself about her heart, that she is ready, even now, to trust him to the death.

Ah! how often does love thus creep on us unawares, beneath the subtle guise of an interest too pure to rouse alarm!

Lady Gwynne is very happy; she does not trouble her head about the future, the present enjoyment is enough for her; nor does she even stop to question why this sudden friendship should make her life seem brighter than it has ever done before. To know he thinks her worthy of his confidence, that he cares for her approval and advice, and her affection makes his troubles less unbearable, is all sufficient for a great content, and she revels in it as a flower in the sunshine.

She has unexpectedly been brought face to face with a con-

genial spirit, and she feels as though existence had commenced afresh for her.

"Soul to soul—and nothing less." Oh, the delight—the ecstasy of knowing that she has a second soul who can understand the workings of her own, and lead it on with each renewal of their intercourse to higher and to better things. For so, in her humility, she confidently believes that Auberon Slade is capable of leading her. And then she dons her most becoming robe for the edification of her second soul, and descends to the dining-room, flushed and triumphant as a young girl to meet her lover; more so, indeed, for the one is about to commence a journey, the charms of which she only knows by hearsay, whilst the other is like a traveller who, having long trod the barren, dreary desert, suddenly comes in sight of a fair city, replete with all the luxuries he has so often sighed for, but never yet obtained.

Her gaiety continues throughout the evening, and for many evenings afterwards, for every interview she has with Auberon Slade renews it. The glance of intelligence he interchanges with her when any allusion is made in public to those subjects which appeal to them most nearly—the peeps their conversations give her of his home pursuits and former life, that life of which she now so much regrets she knows so little—the private history of the rise and progress of each poem, which he has never confided to any ear before her own—all these things, small in themselves, but great links in the chapter of their unfortunate attachment, draw this woman and this man nearer together day by day.

And then their talks about the glorious career which seems to lie before him in the future—those talks in which she speaks so seriously about his want of perseverance and his self-esteem, taking him to task with so much gentle love of him and pride in his ability, and yet with such a profound sense of her own responsibility in being promoted to the post of counsellor, that she seems more like a mother reproving her son than one equal talking to another.

But while he laughs at her remonstrances, they sink into his heart, and bring forth fruit days afterwards, when hers is broken.

It is about this time that he draws from her all the particulars of her marriage with Sir Lyster Gwynne. They are

strolling in the shrubberies together after dinner, most of the company being scattered about the grounds of Felton Hall; but these two, by some strange fatality, have departed from the rest, and find themselves alone, with no more dangerous listeners to their conversation than the night-blowing flowers and the couchant birds.

"Now I want to hear all about Sir Lyster and yourself," says Auberon Slade, as hand in hand they wander down the dusky paths; "where you met him; how soon you fell in love; and how long you were engaged."

"I assure you there is nothing to relate," she replies, indifferently; "the tale would be most commonplace."

"But it will possess interest for me; everything that concerns you does. I should like to know every particular of your former life—where you were born, and how they mixed your pap, and where you went to school, and how many times you were whipped"——

"O Auberon!"

"Don't you believe me, Gwendoline?"

They have come to call each other by their Christian names, they hardly know how; but as Mr Slade insisted that he never thought of her, and never had thought of her as "Lady Gwynne," and that when he said the words he did not mean them, it seemed no worse that he should be permitted to say what he did mean—at all events, when they were by themselves—as not to mean what he said. And it required but a very little persuasion to make her follow suit.

"Oh, yes, I believe you—with a few reserves. But what can I say about my marriage that will be interesting? It was such a quiet affair, and it took place so long ago."

"How old were you at the time?"

"Nearly sixteen."

"So young!"

"Yes, I was young; but very tall for my age. Well, if you really want to hear about it, I will tell you. My father's name was Griffiths; he was the incumbent of Ynyscedwyn, the place where most of Sir Lyster's Welsh property is situated; and I lived all alone with him at the Vicarage, and —oh! I was so happy!"

She little thinks how the sigh she consecrates to the

memory of the happy past reveals the miserable contrast in the present.

"You were his only child?"

"Yes; my mother died soon after I was born. I can't remember her, but I will show you her miniature if you will remind me of it. She looks so good and gentle. I think life would have been very different for me if she had lived."

And here comes another deep sigh.

"But your father?"

"He died a few months before my marriage."

"You have not yet told me about that."

"Sir Lyster used to come down occasionally to look after his property," she goes on, hurriedly; "and as my father was the only gentleman resident in Ynyscedwyn, they naturally saw a great deal of one another, and of me—and after a while Sir Lyster told my father he wanted to marry me."

"But I thought your father died first."

"Yes; so he did; because I wasn't engaged just then. I couldn't make up my mind at first; I had seen so little of the world, you know. But it vexed my poor father sadly—my indecision did, I mean—and when he died, I was so miserable I didn't seem to care what became of me, and so"——

"And so you *sacrificed* yourself," says Auberon Slade, indignantly.

Lady Gwynne glances up at him, opening her eyes almost as though she were but just aroused from sleep; her pride is touched; she sees that she has gone too far.

"You quite misunderstand me," she answers, quickly; "there was no one to compel, not even to persuade me to marry Sir Lyster. I did it of my own free choice."

"Yes?" incredulously.

"Yes!" with a little stamp of her foot. "It is not fair of you, Auberon, to try and misconstrue my meaning."

"My dear Gwendoline! I have no wish to misconstrue it, my greatest desire is to believe you happy. Well! you found you were in love with Sir Lyster—let me hear the end of it."

But his words seem to provoke more indignation than they are worth.

"Oh! how can you be so cruel, so unkind to me; you

must guess how it all happened. My father died, and left me penniless; and I was so young and ignorant of the world, I thought there never could be greater happiness for me than complying with his last wishes. Besides, Sir Lyster was very kind to me—as he always has been since,"—after a short pause.

"Well, then, you are perfectly happy, and there 's an end of it," says Auberon Slade.

"There is no need for any of my friends to pity me," she answers, gravely.

"I see there is not. You love your husband, have a promising child, a high station in society, and a luxurious home. I, for one, think you are a very lucky woman. There are not many marriages, entered into so early in life as yours, that turn out as well."

But to this remark he receives no reply.

"You have made me quite envious," he goes on, presently, "drawing such a picture of domestic happiness. You should have more consideration for my bachelor loneliness, Gwendoline."

But here he stops short, for his companion has sunk upon a bench near at hand, and he can hear, from the quick drawing of her breath, that she is weeping.

What man can stand the sight or sound of tears from the woman whom he loves? They torture him; he is not master of himself whilst they remain.

"Gwendoline! my poor Gwendoline!" cries Auberon Slade, as he takes a seat upon the bench beside her.

His arm is round her waist, his hand warmly pressed upon her own; in the dim twilight he kisses her, not passionately or so as to make her fear, but calmly, almost reverently, upon her smooth forehead and wet cheeks. Yet the colour flies to her face; he feels the blood mount, hot and throbbing, beneath the impress of his lips.

"No! Auberon, no!" she says, reproachfully, as, disengaging herself from his clasp, she tries to rise to her feet. But he prevents her.

"Why should you shrink from me, dearest? Have you not promised to regard me as a brother, and am I to be denied the comfort of consoling you as though you were my sister? Come, Gwendoline! sit down again, and believe that my

affection for you is too sincere to permit me to repeat any act by which I have had the misfortune to offend you!"

"O Auberon! I am not offended."

"Prove it then by unburdening your heart to me; it will be as light again when I have shared its troubles. Dearest! you can tell me nothing new! I know that you are not happy in your married life."

And in the twilight, with her hand locked in his, and believing that if she had a brother she should feel just so towards him, she tells him all.

CHAPTER X.

A FATAL DISCOVERY.

But where, all this time, the curious may inquire, are the eyes of Sir Lyster Gwynne?

They are in their usual place, and busy at their usual occupation; which is, passing over matters of real importance to his friends, to magnify the least trifle that affects himself; for if the character of Sir Lyster Gwynne has not already made itself apparent in these pages, it may be summed up here in a few words. He is selfish, has been so from his cradle, and will be so to his grave; and it is wonderful, on close inspection, how few lives are not so; and this selfishness blinds his eyes to the feelings of every one except himself, and even prevents his being jealous.

He loves his wife, after a fashion; that is, whilst she gives in to him in everything (and Lady Gwynne's training commenced so early, and has continued so long, that it is an exceptional case when she is not both good and gentle with her husband); but let her oppose him in the smallest matter, by making an appointment that crosses with his plans, or keeping him waiting five minutes for his dinner, or going to church when he wishes her to ride on horseback, and she is made to remember it for days afterwards, by the alteration in his demeanour. For Sir Lyster is sulky as well as selfish, the two qualities usually going together.

So long as Lady Gwynne's intimacy with Auberon Slade

does not clash with the baronet's meals or other comforts, he will not see it, or seeing, interfere; for he is too sure of himself, of his position, and his wife's docility, to believe it possible that she would dare to play him false, for the sake of the fairest face or proudest intellect that ever graced this earth.

Other men's wives may bring them to shame (and to hear Sir Lyster discuss women over his wine is to impress one with the idea that he does not believe in the fidelity of any of the sex), but that *his* wife; the woman he has honoured with his hand; on whom he has bestowed one of the oldest titles in England; that *Lady Gwynne* should presume even to imagine another man preferable to himself, does not enter into his calculations; it is a possibility he has never taken the trouble to think about; it would be lost labour—it is a thing simply that *could not be.*

And should Sir Lyster Gwynne ever have the misfortune to be dragged into the Divorce Court, I doubt not that this apparently amiable quality in his disposition, this perfect trust, and incredulity of wrong, will be made good use of by his counsel, and brought forward as an additional proof of the worthlessness of those who could betray him. Such comments have been passed in that court before now, on conduct which, so handled, may seem blameless; but which, if impartially sifted, would shine forth in its true colours, as a specimen of the grossest selfishness, and neglect of the duties which a man takes upon himself, when he swears before God's altar to protect and cherish a woman until death.

But if Sir Lyster's self-bound eyes are incapable of perceiving the danger of so continued and intimate an intercourse between his young wife and a fascinating, clever man like Auberon Slade, others are not so blind.

The little world of Felton Hall, copying the big world in this particular, discusses the fact freely, and puts the very worst construction upon all its bearings.

They do not dare allude to the subject before Auberon Slade, but in his absence their comments, which are, perhaps, less censorial than envious, pass without reserve, and, as is usual in such cases, the opinions as to the probable upshot of his friendship with their hostess, are almost unanimous.

It is so seldom that men believe it possible that a woman

can go half-way to her destruction, and there, scared at what must follow, stop short, and with many tears retrace her steps. With them, if she offend in one tittle of the law, she must be guilty of all; they little think how many, whom they, perhaps, respect and honour, have retraced in like manner their weary path. And who are they to censure? They who scarcely with one exception have gone the whole way; and expect, on their return, to be received with open arms.

Prodigals, who have filled their bellies with the husks that the swine refuse to eat, and yet demand to be clothed with the robe of purity, and to have the ring of faith placed on their hand.

The men at Felton Hall who do not know Gwendoline Gwynne, wish that they had a few thousands laid upon the issue of her intimacy with Auberon Slade. The men who *do* know her, to wit, Major Calvert and Mr Laurence, look very grave when the subject is mentioned, and think of it for many hours afterwards.

Calvert pulls his long moustache, and wishes to Heaven that Slade would go back to town, or that he had the moral courage to risk a quarrel with him by entreating him not to abuse the hospitality he has shown no hesitation in accepting; but Mr Laurence, who has been the true friend of Lady Gwynne for many years past, watches her closely, with the firm resolution to speak out boldly as soon as he shall have a reasonable excuse for doing so.

The one may be anxious for her worldly reputation, but the other is trembling for her soul.

Meanwhile, the object of their solicitude, as though no pit were yawning for her unsuspecting feet, goes on her way rejoicing. Yes! literally rejoicing; for, although she has not yet stooped to recognise them, the flowers of love are springing all about her path, and no wretched doubts have intruded themselves to mar the perfect serenity of her late-found heaven.

She wakes each morning to a sense of new and ever-increasing happiness, for she is about to meet him. She lies down to rest each night, calm and satisfied, beneath the knowledge that, with the morning, joy will return.

No hot and restless dreams disturb her slumbers as they

do his; she sleeps like an innocent child, too full of content with the present to wish for greater pleasures in the future.

If she is troubled, vexed, or worried with the day's occurrences, she flies to Auberon Slade for consolation. If she is pleased, she seeks him still, that he may share her pleasure.

She reads his manuscripts, suggests ideas to him; even attempts, beneath his supervision, to string ideas together for herself; and does it all unconsciously, without a notion that the scales will ever fall from their eyes, and they shall look other to each other than they do; until one fatal morning she taps at the door of his sitting-room, and entering, finds it is deserted.

It is a day on which he has decided to give the partridges a holiday (for Auberon Slade's love of sport has waxed rather cold of late), and his books and papers are loosely scattered on the table, bearing evidence that it is not long since he has quitted them.

Lady Gwynne advances boldly into the room and sits down in the poet's chair, for the friends have grown so familiar with each other by this time, that he will not be surprised on his return to find her waiting for him.

But her attention is soon arrested by the sheet of foolscap paper which is spread out before her; the record evidently of Auberon Slade's latest thought, since the ink with which he has scribbled them is scarcely dry.

Lady Gwynne takes up the paper eagerly; she is always proud to read what he has written, however hastily it may have been transcribed; but, as she peruses this, her eyes dilate—her colour quickens—and she forgets to criticise in the deep interest the words awaken—

* "I give up all for thee! I strive no more
To conquer an inexorable fate,
Or laugh at love that seems to come too late,
For I am fond no longer—I adore!

"O idol of my worship! far too fair
In the great soul that flashes from thine eyes,
I triumph that I win so great a prize,
I tremble! when I think how much I dare.

* The author wishes to acknowledge the obligation under which she lies for the following verses to the pen of a literary friend.

"For a vast gulph yet yawns 'twixt thee and me,
Which God's set laws forbid us both to span:
Love dimmed our eyes when first our love began
With happy tears that would not let us see!

"The same love dries them now, and we behold
The solemn finger pointing out the warning,
Sweet if the night be, ah! beware the morning,
Lest horrors curse the loves that both enfold!

"Oh! I have dreamed of love, but never known
The wondrous glories that I welcome now!
The pain and sorrow written on thy brow
A strange, new, other life to me have shown!

"For, from the fires of suffering thou hast come
A well tried angel to my lonely heart;
I thank thee that thou bidst me take my part;
And gild the shadows of thy darker home.

"Can love be curst where love has so much blest?
Can heart be foul where heart can purify?
Oh! if it be so—Let us rather die,
And love where perfect spirits are at rest!

"But not in vain our hearts have sorely bled,
And groaned through all this wilderness of fate,
The cloud has light behind it—Darling, wait!
And strength through weakness shall be perfected!

"Then draw me closer, closer to thee, dear,
Do what we will, thy fate and mine are fixed,
My life and thine, inevitably mixed,
We take our destiny and do not fear.

"Yes! all of self has sweetly died in me,
Thy noble heart is beating in my breast,
No one shall steal it now! There let it rest,
And know, dear love, that I am lost in thee."

. . . . . .

She reads these verses over, one—two—three times; and then, as the full meaning of them, and of all it discloses to her, bursts upon her mind, a feeling of suffocation overpowers her; the room turns round; it seems as though she could not breathe; and still holding the paper in her hand, she rises, almost unconsciously, to her feet, and stands by the table, grasping one corner of it with fierce energy in the vain attempt to steady thus her trembling limbs.

Her eyes are open now; she can no longer close them to the

truth, nor pretend to mistake the feeling with which Auberon Slade regards her—with which she regards him in return—for, with the conviction of his love, there comes the knowledge—heralded by a bright, hot blush of passionate pleasure—that she loves him too; and happy, grateful tears, whose course is directed by the curved channels of her smiling mouth, run down the woman's face.

"Happy, grateful!" I seem to hear some voices cry—"when the creature should have been overwhelmed by shame and misery! What sort of heroine is this for whom our sympathy is demanded?"

Patience! dear Moralists! the "creature" shall be as miserable as ever your rigid virtue could desire before long! do not grudge her her short hour of triumph now! It is nature that prompts her to glory in the knowledge that she has gained her lover; and nature will be the direst avenger of her weakness when she has resigned him.

A quick, short footstep; a beam of sunshine entering the room; a familiar hand laid on her shoulder, and the voice of her Fate sounds in her ear again.

"Well! thief! rifling my possessions as usual! What business have you to come and make all this disturbance amongst my papers. Who gave you leave? Was ever such a woman?"

She does not answer him, but the shoulder upon which he leans is not quite steady, and the paper in her hand is fluttering.

"What have you got there? Oh!—*that*! Well!"—after a brief pause, and in a lowered voice, "What do you think of it?"

"I do not know."

"Cannot your heart prompt you, Gwendoline?"

"O Auberon! I never thought—I never dreamt—that it could come to this!"

"What a short-sighted mortal you must be, then!"

"Am I?"

It seems as though she could not speak except in monosyllables; the idea still so wonderful—so new—to her, that after each contemplation of it, she relapses into the same sort of hazy dream. But his voice rouses her again.

"You are not angry with me, darling?"

"Angry!—O Auberon!"—and then she turns, and their eyes meet, and for the first time feed upon each other's fire;

searching far, far down into unfathomable depths, until the hot blood mounts to either face, and their spirits rush together and are one.

And then she closes her eyes, and leans weakly back against the table; whilst with a deep-drawn sigh he turns away, and walks to the further end of the apartment.

But after a moment, Lady Gwynne recovers herself, and her spirit of mischief is in the ascendant.

"What about Lady Mary St Maur?" she says, slily.

"Dash Lady Mary St Maur," is the impatient reply of Auberon Slade, as he returns to her side. "Do you imagine that I am going to waste my time fretting after an arrant coquette, who must have deceived me from the very first? No, Gwendoline! the woman who holds me must be the woman who loves me! though I doubt whether I should have been able to avoid falling in love with you, if you had cared for me or not. You are a very witch, and I was your victim from the first moment that I saw you!"

"But how do you know I care for you?"

"It would be useless to deny it. I read the blessed truth in every look and tone and gesture."

"Why! what a fool I must be, then, to give the world so false an impression of my feelings!"

She speaks in jest, but he answers her as though she were in earnest.

"Don't say that, Gwendoline! If you only knew how much it pains me! I cannot bear a doubt thrown on my entire belief in your affection for me."

"It cannot be of so much moment to you as all that!"

"It is all the moment in the world to me. It is my life, my everything! O darling! if you only knew *how much* I love you; how my soul is welded with your own; how I exist but in your living, and should die were you to cease to care for me; you would not dare to jest on such a subject. Gwendoline, like many other men, I have wasted my affections upon a dozen frivolous attachments, but I have never yet given myself away, heart, body, and soul, to one woman, as I do now to you. I swear it! Won't you believe me?"

She does not answer—but she turns upon him eyes, full of a new tremulous light, which say more than it would be in the power of her tongue to express. She has never had such an

avowal made to her before (remember that, you who would too quickly condemn her short-lived happiness); she has never heard such words, nor felt such deep emotion, nor deemed it possible that such a love existed, excepting in the absinthe-heated imaginations of romance writers.

And the knowledge that it is hers, and Auberon Slade's the hand to hold it to her, is almost too much to bear; and, hardly sensible of what she does, she puts him feebly from her, and turns her face away.

"Gwendoline, don't do that, for Heaven's sake! Tell me that I am not mistaken, that you have not been playing with me as *she* did—or I shall go mad!"

He pulls her almost roughly by the dress, he forces her to turn and look at him, he extracts her answer by a determined and commanding manner—an assumption of superiority, the first exercise of the yoke she loves to feel upon her.

"I *will* be answered, Gwendoline; I demand it as a right! Child, have pity on me, and put me out of my suspense."

The tone of supplication stirs her heart, already far too full; and the tender eyes she bends upon him are melting with excess of love.

"You *know* I love you—that I have loved you from the first, although I have had no name in which to clothe the feelings that possess me. My heart and soul are yours, Auberon; do with them as you think best! Henceforth you must be responsible for what I am."

He tries to hold her, but, with downcast looks and burning cheeks, she breaks from him and rushes to the sofa. In another moment he is seated by her side.

"Gwendoline! dearest! Tell me that again! Say that you *are* mine; that you *will be* mine—now and for ever!"

He has her hand in his, his arm about her waist, her whole figure lies in his embrace.

"There is no choice in the matter, Auberon. Were I to cease to be yours, or you to care for me, I could not live."

"My own!"—and the sunny locks come nearer and nearer, until they rest upon her bosom; whilst the warm, impassioned light in the uplifted eyes burns into her very soul.

Years afterwards, when that poor bosom is as chill as death beneath the spirit's disappointment, the remembrance of those

eyes, as she looked down upon them, will have the power to kindle in it a ray of temporary warmth.

> "'Tis better to have loved and lost,
> Than never to have loved at all."

And who, in his senses, would exchange the memory of dead delights, however bitter, for the humiliating knowledge that the common lot has passed him over?

"O my God! my God!" she muses, and not irreverently, as her heart pants beneath the weight of its dear burden; and with closed eyes she lays back her head upon the sofa cushions, and believes that so much happiness must kill her. "How fair this world is! how beautiful the gifts with which Thou hast adorned Thy creatures! What have I done to deserve so much felicity, such an illimitable blessing, such a vast arena of bliss, as I inherit in the possession of this love? I cannot contemplate it; the very prospect takes my breath away. I shall die beneath my load of happiness. O Auberon! my love! my dearest, dearest love! what can I do to pay you back for all your goodness to me?"

She does not say this, but it runs through her mind as she sits on the sofa, and when a chance word rouses her from her reverie, she starts up with a cry that is more of pain than pleasure.

"O Auberon! Auberon! don't tell me again that you love me; it is impossible—I cannot believe it."

"You must believe it, darling!" raising himself that he may see her face; "it is your fate and mine."

She looks at him; her breath comes hardly, her lips quiver, and the temptation is too great to be resisted; he raises his own to meet them.

But the action appears to offend her, for, like an arrow from a bow, she darts from his side, and turns the handle of the door.

"Unkind!" he says, reproachfully.

At that word her steps are arrested, and she lingers on the threshold, nervously twisting the handle backwards and forwards, and tracing out the pattern of the carpet with her foot.

"Gwendoline!"

He speaks in a whisper; but there is something in the tone of his voice which almost makes her heart stop.

She lifts her head and sees him standing just where she has left him, holding out his arms to her.

"Come to me, darling! Don't leave me like this, or you will leave me wretched. Here is your true home—*here!*—where your heart is in safe keeping; don't be afraid to let your lips seal the confession that they themselves have made!"

She hesitates a moment, but only a moment; for that false courage which makes a woman imagine that her sacrifice of self is glorious only according to its completeness comes over her, and with a cry, she turns and runs back to the shelter of his breast. He folds her to it; he showers kisses upon her lips, her cheeks, her forehead; he calls her by every endearing name that he can think of; and she clings to him as though in this world they were never again to be separated, and is divinely happy.

But as they stand thus together, forgetting all the world except themselves, a shriek runs through the house—a shriek that reaches from attic to basement, followed by a dull sound of something falling; and with eyes made wild by sudden horror, and lips that have parched even as they lay against his own, Lady Gwynne disengages herself from her lover's arms, and with the hurried exclamation, "My God! it is Daisy!" rushes from the apartment.

CHAPTER XI.

AT DAISY'S SIDE.

THE maternal instinct is not at fault; for though the fell scream that rings through Felton Hall is from the lips of a passing domestic, the sight that occasions it is the sight of Daisy, who (like an inveterate hoyden as she is) has been riding on the balustrades of the upper landing, and having, in an evil moment, missed her balance, fallen an unconscious heap upon the tessellated pavement of the hall.

There she lies, white and senseless, looking as though she were already released from the burden of life; and when Auberon Slade, who has followed Lady Gwynne as quickly as he may, comes upon the scene, of the whole group that has

surrounded the child's body, he finds the mother the only one sufficiently collected to give any directions.

Her cheek is indeed blanched, as though the mortal agony had taken possession of herself, and the fresh, rosy colour of the lips, so lately pressed against his own, has faded to a leaden hue; but still her eye is steadfast, and she speaks with calmness.

"Mr Slade, will you help me to carry her up to her bed?"

He makes no answer, except by tenderly lifting the child's body, and bearing it upstairs again—those stairs on which she had been so gleefully playing when she met with what seems to the spectators to be her death.

But as he lays her on her own cot, in her mother's dressing-room, Lady Gwynne turns to him again.

"I must have a doctor, and at once—Dr Stewart, of Willington. Will you see that the messenger is despatched?"

"I will go myself, if you will let me."

"O, Auberon, do!" and a warm, grateful light irradiates her sad eyes. "I shall like to remember that you fetched him, though it will be of no use. O my God!"

"Don't say that, Gwendoline!—don't think it! Remember whilst there is life there is hope."

"Sir Lyster should be told."

"I will send some one to find him. I will do everything that is needful, if you will promise me to keep your heart up."

"I will—for your sake—so long as it is possible. And now go, pray go! every moment is of consequence."

And so he leaves her, hanging tearless and horror-struck over the unconscious body of her child, whilst her attendants cluster round and do all they can to persuade her that poor Daisy's fate is sealed.

He orders the fastest horse in the stables to be saddled, and he rides as speedily as it will carry him; first down to the field where he guesses Sir Lyster and his friends will be discussing their luncheon, and then (having communicated the bad news to the father, who appears wonderfully unaffected by it) to Willington to fetch the doctor; both places lying in the same direction. He comes back, heated but triumphant, having succeeded in bringing Dr Stewart to Felton Hall much sooner than he expected; but here follows several hours of miserable suspense, in which he can neither gain admittance

to Lady Gwynne, nor hear definite news of the child's condition, and everybody seems to have forgotten that, by virtue of the exertion he has made on their behalf, he is entitled to more consideration from his host and hostess than the rest of the guests.

The luncheon-bell rings, but he has no heart to go down into the dining-room; and the afternoon wears on, and the shadows on the grass begin to lengthen, and still Dr Stewart and Lady Gwynne are closeted together in the dressing-room; and the only answer he can obtain to his continuous inquiries after Daisy's welfare is, that she has not yet regained her consciousness. His heart bleeds for Lady Gwynne, and all that she is suffering; but the morning's cloud, however painful, has no power to obscure the morning's exultation; and left to himself and the dominion of his own thoughts, Auberon Slade is very excited and very triumphant.

He really loves this woman: loves her with an amount of passion, mingled with a purer and more lasting feeling, such as astonishes himself; and he fully believes that he has accomplished his destiny, and reached the utmost tether of his capability for forming an attachment. It is true that he does not see the end of it, nor dare contemplate to what his avowal of the morning may lead; but he is willing to leave all that to what he calls chance, and let events take their ordinary course.

Meanwhile she loves him, and he loves her; and that fact is all-sufficient to render him blissfully contented, and incapable of doing any work for the remainder of the day.

But is it possible, that the fact of her being the wife of Sir Lyster Gwynne, and the possession of her by himself—without the commission of a gross crime and huge dishonour—a simple impossibility, has no power to disturb the man's serenity, and turn his triumph into chagrin and disappointment?

Not at the moment; for he has not yet made up his mind to sully her purity, nor use any base persuasions to make her quit her present position in society; he would shrink with apparent horror from such proposals made to him, and say that death were preferable to seeing the woman whom he loves disgraced before the world—and he would firmly believe that he meant all he said.

Some scruples must pass through his mind, however; some twinges assail his conscience; as he remembers how her kisses

scorched his lips, and rendered him more weak of purpose; but if so, he dismisses them with the false argument, that it is not so much his fault that matters have come to such a crisis, as the fault of the idiot who, having secured so fascinating a woman, can leave her (void of love and tenderness and sympathy) exposed to the attentions of a man like himself.

And as these thoughts course through the mind of Auberon Slade, he looks with considerable satisfaction at the fair, flushed face, lighted up with the best of beauty, the Beauty of Intellect, which the mirror casts back upon him, and evinces no sweet surprise born of humility, that Lady Gwynne should have succumbed to him so easily.

"Poor darling!" he murmurs—the very adjective he uses being expressive of the self-gratified state of his feelings—"to be in the clutches of such a fool as Sir Lyster! How I wish it were in my power to rescue her with credit to herself. There is not much doubt whether I could make her happy. Well, it is not every man who could attract and secure the love of such a woman, and since I have gained I shall take good care not to let it slip again."

Between such flattering reveries as this, and the task of opening his door to listen or make inquiries every time a footstep passes by his chamber, the long afternoon wears itself away for Auberon Slade, and the cool of the evening sets in. Within the sick room—which is on the same floor as his own—with the exception of voices in murmured converse, or an occasional order whispered on the threshold, all seems hushed as death; and the only answer the servants return to his questions is, that "Miss Daisy is as bad as bad can be, and the parson has been sent for to see their lady."

And, indeed, as the great dinner-bell clangs out harshly at its usual hour, and Auberon Slade, anxious to meet and speak with Sir Lyster on the condition of his child, is, with some alacrity, descending the principal staircase, he meets Mr Laurence on his way up, and the two men stop and shake hands.

"I was sorry to hear that you had been sent for," says Auberon Slade. "I am afraid it means that matters are at their worst."

"I hope not," rejoins the other, gravely; "although I agree with you that in most cases of sickness the appearance

of the priest is the forerunner of death. People try doctors, physic, friends, everything before the one thing needful, and it is only when earthly aid fails them that they have recourse to the consolations of religion. I suppose it does not often strike them that, were they to try those first, they might experience no need of the other."

At this address Auberon Slade twists about uneasily, and can only murmur a kind of congratulatory acquiescence.

"You are an old friend of Lady Gwynne's, I believe, Mr Laurence? You have known her a long time?" he says, at last.

"A very long time, Mr Slade. Long enough to have earned the privilege to speak openly to her whenever I see any cause to fear lest her generous and kindly, yet thoughtless inclination, should lead her astray?"

"Oh, yes—of course—a great privilege, I am sure," replies his companion, rendered unaccountably anxious by some peculiar inflection of the speaker's voice to get away. "And so you really think there is some hope for the poor child?"

"I met Mr Fuller, of Leighton, who was sent for to consult with Dr Stewart, just outside the gates, and he tells me that she has opened her eyes and spoken, and is evidently sensible. But she will doubtless require great care for some days to come, and I suppose it will be a considerable time before the medical men will be able to determine what amount of injury she may not have caused herself."

"Poor Lady Gwynne! How she must be suffering!"

"I am sure she is; but there must be some good reason for the discipline. These trials, apparently so unnecessary, do not come to us by *chance*, Mr Slade."

"I suppose not. Don't let me detain you from her."

And the men separate for their respective destinations.

On entering the dining-room, Auberon Slade is disgusted to find—the covers having been removed—that every one is eating and talking with as good a will as though no dark shadow hung over the family of Gwynne; Sir Lyster himself—who at least might have been supposed in some measure to feel the danger of his only child—being the loudest talker and heartiest eater there.

"Come on, Slade!" he shouts, as our hero makes his appearance on the threshold, "we haven't cleared off every-

thing yet; but we shall if you don't make haste. Where have you been hiding yourself all the day, man! We wanted you in the billiard-room sadly this afternoon. Calvert and I have a match on against Penryhn and Lowder—for a pony—and there was only little Jack Pinner to mark. Calvert and I had scored fifty against their forty-five when the dinner-bell rang. We must finish it this evening."

Auberon Slade disdains to evince any interest in the proceedings of Sir Lyster.

"I am glad to hear your child is out of danger," he says, pointedly, as he slips into his accustomed place at table.

"Out of danger! of course she is. Never was in any danger that I believe. Children of that age are always bumping themselves, and seldom the worse for it."

"But it was a terrible fall. The consequences might have been very serious."

"Oh, yes, doubtless! but there is a long distance between what is, and what *might have been*. (Penryhn, my dear fellow, don't keep all the bottles to yourself down at that end of the table, I implore you!) And then Lady Gwynne, like most women, always makes such a fuss over things, she'd have you believe that every accident will end in death."

Auberon Slade cannot trust himself to take up cudgels in her defence; he only throws an angry glance towards his unconscious rival, and grows red as he bends over his plate. But fat Lady Cleaver, who oozes with the milk of human kindness, tries to do the absent justice.

"I thought Lady Gwynne behaved admirably on this occasion," she interrupts the discussion of her *vol-au-vent* to say: "I am sure I never could have displayed so much strength of mind, for the servants were perfectly helpless, and so was the governess; and if it had not been for Lady Gwynne's coolness and forethought, I think we should all have gone out of our minds."

"I have no doubt you would!" replies Sir Lyster, with a look of intelligence towards the rest of the company. But Auberon Slade throws a grateful glance upon her florid, inexpressive countenance, and sees more beauty in it than he has ever done before.

"Well, Lady Gwynne has her consolations," continues the host, after a moment's pause. "She has her doctor and her

parson, and what woman could want more. She 'll sit up till midnight discussing symptoms with the doctor, and talking prayers with the parson, and go to bed under the firm conviction that she is either a martyr or a saint! He! he! he!"

"I was not aware that Lady Gwynne was given to Methodism," remarks Calvert, rather sarcastically.

"My dear boy, they 're all given to it! Let them call themselves what they may—High Church, Broad Church, Low Church, or No Church—women invariably send for the parson at the same time as the doctor, determined, with their usual obstinacy, that if they can't stay in this wicked world any longer, they will at all events get a lift to a better."

"I should think they were scarcely to blame for that," says Auberon Slade, fiercely.

"Of course not! who says they are, so long as they don't insist upon my sharing their devotions! But you are a sentimental fellow, Slade; doesn't it make your mouth water? doesn't it make you wish you had adopted either of the paying trades? Why, yours is a fool to it, man! You can only reach the woman's ears through your printed words; whereas, if you 'd but known it, instead of sitting at this present moment before a plate of venison (with which you don't seem to be making much progress, in my opinion), you might have been in Lady Gwynne's dressing-room, sprinkling drops of eau-de-cologne on Daisy's forehead and drops of comfort in her mother's ear. Which would you prefer—eh?"

Auberon Slade will not answer. He longs to tells his host what he thinks of him, but the force of etiquette (and what a powerful force it is to hinder men!) restrains him, and he keeps silence, glowering darkly at the meats set before him, and seizing the first opportunity to escape from the presence he has grown to detest, and to the solitude of his own room. And then he paces up and down, disconsolate, and almost in despair.

Oh, what a fate it is, to which this woman is condemned! this woman whom he loves so ardently; whom, he thinks, he holds in so much honour and esteem. To be tied to a clown, as utterly unsympathetic with her most sacred feelings as he is with her intellectual pursuits; who holds her "Something better than his dog: a little dearer than his horse."

The thought oppresses, it almost maddens him. He is cap-

able of any act of rashness or of sin, that may bring some liberty to her, as, lonely and restless, he walks up and down his room that night.

He hears Dr Stewart and Mr Laurence leave the house; receives the intelligence that, though immediate danger is over, there is still in the child's state great reason for alarm; thinks of *her*, alone, and full of melancholy foreboding, watching painfully by the bedside of Daisy, and feels as though, at the risk of her fair name, and in utter contempt of all the conventionalities of society, he must rush into that darkened dressing-room, and throw himself down at her feet, and give her the assurance of one heart's fidelity.

But of course he does not do it. Which of us ever does act upon his impulse in matters which defy the code of this world's morals? We break God's laws with the greatest impunity; but to outrage the laws of Mammon (unless indeed we have made up our minds first to abjure it), is quite another thing!

But Auberon Slade does do something; he sits down at his table, and writes and seals the following words, and bribes her maid to take them to her door:—

"DARLING,—Pray send me tidings of yourself and Daisy. My heart bleeds for you: I would give the world to be by your side. Thank you again and again for your assurance of this morning. I have been another man since I received it."

He sees the modest little missive carried to her threshold; hears the low knock that gains admission for it, and watches eagerly for a reply. It comes at last—it seems "at last" to him, although it is not ten minutes before the servant returns with it in her hand—a note as tiny as his own, but which he receives with the feverish welcome of a lover, and locks his door before he opens. But the contents are nothing but a grievous disappointment to him.

"Thank you for your sympathy. Daisy is better, and I am not at all tired. But pray, *pray* forget all that I said and did this morning! I was weak, wicked, mad; I wronged both you and myself; I see it plainly now! And if you really care for me, go home again before I leave this room; I do not feel as if I could ever go downstairs whilst you are there."

Auberon Slade is thunderstruck; it seems as though all his hopes (indefinite as they were) had been quenched in a moment, and he sits for an hour by his table, hanging over her words, and devouring them with his hungry eyes.

And then he crushes the paper into his pocket, and laughs a low laugh of pique and disappointed vanity, and prepares to join the other men in the billiard-room.

"Like the rest of them," he thinks bitterly as he does so, "ready enough to lead a man wrong, but afraid to bear the consequences of sinning. Well, as she wishes it, I suppose I must go, but it will not be long before she repents of having asked me to do so."

But he says nothing on the subject of his proposed departure that night; and his companions remark afterwards that they have never known Slade make himself so witty and agreeable as he did on that occasion.

So little do men's outward actions in general correspond with their inmost thoughts.

Yet, could he pierce the mystery that envelopes the note he has received, Auberon Slade would not be so hard in his judgment upon Lady Gwynne.

She loves him—it is not too strong an expression to say that she adores him—that, her capability for feeling and for suffering being twice as strong as his, the fatal attachment which she has conceived for him, will weigh her down, even to the grave, when, if not forgotten, it shall have lost all its sting for Auberon Slade.

But it is the very intensity, the force of her affection, that causes her to fear; that makes her feel that she cannot live in his presence, and keep up the airy sham of friendship which has hitherto deceived them both; nor is she the woman to drag out a life of deception, and live contented with herself. Amidst the solitude, and the darkness, and the dread of Daisy's sick-chamber, she has come to this conclusion: that either she must be Auberon Slade's, or he must go. She glances round for help on every side, but there is none. She lifts her eyes to heaven, aided by the pious words that have been breathed into her ear, and there she finds it (though for her dull eyes in still imperfect measure), but help at least to see the right and strive to follow it.

And then she feels that he *must go!*—her treasure—her

love—the sum-total of her life—that she must violently separate from him. And she writes the supposed fiat on her knees, and amidst a storm of blistering tears.

A thousand times that night, watching by her child's bed, whilst her husband snores melodiously in the adjoining room, does she revolve the words she used, in her own mind, and ask herself if they were really necessary; if so great a sacrifice were literally demanded of her; whither she might not, with impunity to her own soul and his, keep Auberon Slade as her dear friend; learn with and from him, and find her life's happiness in devotion to his welfare. The voice of Satan opposes itself to the strong voice of conscience, and half, at times, persuades her that she may; but her mind is undecided, and her will is wavering; and for very knowledge of her own weakness, she dare not choose the path that seems to her most pleasant.

A foolish fortune predicted for her by a wandering gipsy in her childhood, that she should live to be twice married, keeps ringing in her ear, and making her thoughts all confusion; until she grows ashamed of so much folly, and dashes cold water on her forehead, and fears her brain is wandering. And Sir Lyster, who in general a cannonade would hardly wake, is wakened early on the following morning, by the sound of low sobs by his bedside, and the touch of tears upon the cheeks.

"What the devil!" he exclaims, impatiently, as he turns upon his pillow with a grunt; "why can't you come to bed, or behave like a Christian?"

"O Lyster! Lyster!" she cries, laying her sweet, smooth cheeks against cheeks considerably inflamed from the debauch of the previous evening, "tell me—have I been a good wife to you? is there anything in which I have particularly failed in doing my duty?"

Sir Lyster raises his purple visage from the pillow, and stares at her, as though he thought she had gone mad.

"Is the child dead?" he says, roughly.

"Dead! My God! no. What made you think of such a dreadful thing? She has been sleeping ever since midnight. But I——I know that I am often tiresome and thoughtless, and determined to have my own way, and you must feel disappointed in me. O Lyster! tell me if there is any way

in which I can please you better, any little thing which I can do to make you happy; work me, use me in any manner you can think of, so that I may earn the title of a good and faithful wife."

She has buried her repentant face into his pillow; she cannot see the look of undisguised astonishment with which this creature of no sentiment regards her.

"Do you know what you 're talking about?" he ejaculates, presently. "You 've been taking too much of old Stewart's medicine, or parson Laurence's prayers; it is evident that *something* has got into your head."

"O Lyster! don't speak to me in that way," she entreats, tearfully; "if you are unkind to me now, you will kill me."

"*Unkind!* Well! whatever the Lord made women for, beats my comprehension altogether. The idea of waking a man out of his sleep to tell him such rubbish as that! Get to your bed, do! and sleep yourself into your senses again, or I shall think you 're a greater fool than the rest of your sex."

And turning on his pillow with an oath, Sir Lyster once more composes himself to his balmy slumbers.

CHAPTER XII.

SIGNING THE WARRANT.

Auberon Slade takes the first opportunity, on the following morning, to inform his host that he intends to leave Felton Hall, and Sir Lyster Gwynne is naturally astonished both at the suddenness of the proposal and the promptitude with which he intends to put it into execution.

Several of the men, invited for the shooting season, have already left. Felton Hall is thinning day by day of its most agreeable guests; and its master, who finds little pleasure in anything but field sports and questionable talk, is strongly opposed to Auberon Slade's new idea.

Besides, had he not affirmed, but a week beforehand, that nothing should prevent his remaining for the pheasant shooting?

"But I have been here for more than a month," urges Mr Slade, though indecisively; and my strength is perfectly restored."

"Have you any particular reason for returning to town?" is the blunt rejoinder; and to this he scarcely knows what to answer.

He *has* a particular reason, as all those who have read of him will be aware; but he can hardly tell the husband what that is, and lays himself open to the charge of dissembling, in consequence. He murmurs something about work, and family obligations, and previous engagements; but each excuse meets with its proper refutation, until his intentions have not a leg to stand on.

And then, in desperation, remembering her entreaty that he should go before she came downstairs again, and feeling his pride new-pricked by the remembrance, Auberon Slade mentions Lady Gwynne's name—and is sorry for it the minute afterwards.

"But putting all private considerations to one side," he stammers, "I think, in the present state of affairs—with your child ill, and her mother's presence so necessary in the sick-room—that it will be a relief to Lady Gwynne to have the house cleared as much as possible."

"Did she tell you so?" demands the husband, quickly, and thus, taken aback, Auberon Slade is not ready with his reply.

"Oh, no!—of course not—that is, I mean, I have had no personal communication with Lady Gwynne since the accident occurred."

The adjective does not escape Sir Lyster's notice; he is a booby, but he is cunning; and where his suspicions are aroused, able to ferret out and piece together trivial circumstances that would escape the notice of, or be passed over in the wider range of sight taken by a cleverer man. And having had reason, on more than one occasion, to suspect his wife does not altogether approve of some of the bachelor friends he brings home to Felton Hall, he is determined that this time, at all events, he will have his own way, and let her see it. But he does not breathe a hint of his suspicions to Auberon Slade.

"My dear fellow," he says, determinately, "I won't hear of your leaving us—and there 's an end of it. Town is empty;

you will find all your friends gone into the country; and at the end of ten days you will cut your throat. As to Lady Gwynne and her fancies, it cannot make the slightest difference to her pottering about the child's room, if there are twenty men below stairs, or two. And it will make all the difference in the world to me. So let us hear no more about your returning home until you have had, at least, a fortnight's sport with the pheasants. Why! the birds are more plentiful this year than they 've been for the last ten.—Fact!—The covers swarm with them; and I 've two of the best broke dogs in the county. I refuse to let your portmanteau go out of my drive gates. It 's no use thinking of it."

Sir Lyster does not say this because he particularly desires longer to retain the presence of a man with whom he has certainly nothing in common; but because he suspects that his wife has, tacitly or otherwise, given him to understand that his room will be preferable to his company; and he is determined to show her that he is, what he is so fond of proclaiming himself, "master in his own house!" And so, like many another, bent on a selfish purpose that will not permit him to see, he drives his pig to market the wrong way.

Meanwhile, Auberon Slade, by passive non-resistance, is silently assenting to Sir Lyster's demand. He has no wish to leave Felton Hall; on the contrary, he has an earnest desire to meet Lady Gwynne again, and hear her tongue refute her written words.

And if this man insists upon it (so he argues with himself), he sees no choice but to remain; he has done all that was required of him in having expressed a wish to go.

He is very weak, and inconsiderate for her welfare; but few men are strong when under the dominion of passion, and fewer still will give up their own wishes for the sake of the woman they profess to love.

Still, the recollection of her wish, and the fear of her displeasure, deter him from giving an unqualified consent to her husband's wishes; and Sir Lyster leaves him, uncertain whether he intends to quit Felton Hall or no, and boiling over with indignation against the supposed author of his impending disappointment.

He goes straight from Auberon Slade to her presence; and regardless of poor Daisy's broken slumbers, demands an immediate explanation of the mystery.

"What on earth have you been saying or writing to Auberon Slade about his returning to town?"

The abrupt question startles her.

"Saying, writing?" she falters, turning ashy white, as a horrid suspicion darts through her mind that her epistle of the night before has fallen into the wrong hands.

"Yes; saying or writing. Writing most probably, as Slade declares he has not spoken to you since the child's accident occurred. Here he comes to me, with some humbugging story of his being obliged to return home at once, before he has even had a shot at the pheasants; and from the manner in which he mentioned your name, I am sure you have had something to do with it."

"Well," she replies, hesitatingly, thinking that "honesty will be the best policy,"—a truism which, on occasions, the experience of this world sadly contradicts,—"I did say, in answer to a note which Mr Slade sent me last evening, inquiring after Daisy's welfare, that—that—perhaps I might not see him again, as it is likely to be a long time before I am able to go downstairs as usual. And you know, Lyster," observing the displeasure which suddenly gathers in her husband's face, "that he has been here for some time—nearly six weeks; and in any case I suppose it cannot be long before he returns to London. Major Calvert and Mr Penrhyn leave the day after to-morrow, and—and"——

But here she stops, frightened at the look with which the baronet confronts her; his anger is thoroughly roused, and he is about to let her know it.

"How *dare* you?" he commences; "how dare you presume to dictate to my friends when their visits here shall either begin or cease? Who gave you leave—by whose authority have you been acting?"

"O Lyster! don't be angry! I did it for the best. Indeed—indeed—it is best that he should go."

"*For the best*," with withering contempt. "What made you do it at all? Answer me that!"

"Daisy is so ill," she falters, "and the house is full enough—and"——

"D—t—n!" exclaims Sir Lyster; "that I ever should have taken a woman to interfere in my affairs in this fashion. You have strangely forgotten yourself, madam, and it is fit that you should know it."

"O Lyster! for God's sake be advised by me. I don't think you care much for the society of Mr Slade, and he does not enjoy the shooting like the other men. Keep Calvert and Penryhn with you; I daresay they will stay on if you ask them; but let Auberon Slade go back to his own home, and his own pursuits."

She has taken his rough hand, and raised her pleading face to his: she is entreating him to spare her honour and his own; but he will neither see nor hear, and shakes her off as though she were obnoxious to him.

"Leave me alone!—will you? What 's the good of all this sentimental nonsense when you have just been doing exactly opposite to what I wish you. However, you 've overshot the mark this time, and that I can tell you! and none of your slobbering will gain you your own way."

A strange difference takes place in Lady Gwynne's demeanour as she hears these words. Her face grows cold, her eyes shoot fire, and she draws up her figure proudly, and is silent.

"I have but two words to say to you on this subject," continues Sir Lyster, presently. "Auberon Slade will remain at Felton Hall as long as he chooses to remain here"——

"I am sure I don't care if he stays till doomsday," she interrupts him, scornfully.

"Hold your tongue, and don't presume to speak till I have finished. He will remain here, and you will come down and do the honours of the dinner-table to him this evening."

"Give me till to-morrow!" she pants.

"Not a bit of it. Why the devil should I give you till to-morrow—and after your behaviour too?"

"Daisy!—she is still so weak."

"She has plenty of nurses to look after her. Hang it all, why do I keep such a lot of servants if my wife is to be turned into a nursery-maid?"

"Say no more; I will be punctual."

"You had better be, or you will repent it," he mutters, angrily, as he turns on his heel, and without a glance at his sick child, leaves the apartment.

When he is gone, Lady Gwynne rises from her seat, and with a knitted brow and trembling hand, turns the key in the door after him.

He has raised her pride, indignation, resentment, and has completed the task which he commenced that morning; let him beware of the fruit that shall spring from the seed he scatters with so liberal a hand.

To repulse her confidence, and throw cold water on an exhibition of her sentiment, is a dangerous game for any man to play with any woman; but where he is not master of her love it is a fatal mistake, and Sir Lyster Gwynne has committed that mistake now.

That his wife ever cared for him is most improbable, for he married her at an age when she had had none of that experience of the world which is absolutely necessary to the formation of a prudent and happy choice.

But the feeling with which she will regard him henceforth will fall very short of the quiet submission which has characterised her previous demeanour; for she has gone to him with her heart, hot and restless, filled with love—her first experience of the passion—for another man, and yet only eager that this one—her true owner, to whom she desires to be faithful—should aid and abet her in treading the path of virtue, and he has refused his help—has thrust away her clinging hand—ridiculed her tears—almost thrown her from him into the arms of Auberon Slade: those dangerous arms, so ready to receive and give her comfort.

And left alone, Lady Gwynne dashes the proud tears from her cheek, and lays down her head on Daisy's pillow, and tries to close her eyes to everything: the cheerless past—the troublous present—the dark, uncertain future.

She is roused from her reverie by a knock at the door, and the reception of a slip of paper, on which words are written in the well-known hand.

"What am I to do? Sir Lyster will not hear of my going! You must decide for me."

And, without hesitation, she sits down and sends him her reply.

"*Stay!* It is neither your fault nor mine. We have done our best."

Ah! God! could she foresee the lengthened misery to which those words condemn her, she would not dare to write them. Did she part with him at once, as she desires and knows is best for her, she might yet outlive her fatal predilection.

But with this hasty note—the offspring of her husband's inconsideration—her fate is sealed.

It speeds upon its errand: it reaches the hand of Auberon Slade; and Lady Gwynne has signed the death-warrant of her heart.

CHAPTER XIII.

A NEW COMPACT.

THEY meet! How should they meet except with fluttering hearts, and downcast, conscious looks, and lips that strive vainly not to tremble, whilst uttering the most ordinary salutation.

But Sir Lyster Gwynne is satisfied. His wife, clad in soft muslins and rich laces, which well become her graceful, tender beauty, appears before him at the appointed time, and takes her usual place at the head of his table, proving thereby the strength of his marital authority—the superior power instinctively recognised in the greater mind by the lesser.

What matter to him if she looks pale, and sad, and thoughtful; if her eyes studiously avoid the glance of Auberon Slade, or the bright flush rises higher and higher in her cheek each time his voice falls on her ear; her husband is either too dull or too indifferent to observe it. Some minds might draw an inference from the very care with which the two friends, erstwhile so intimate, avoid each other for the remainder of the evening, keeping as far apart as the limits of the drawing-room will permit them, and pursuing their several employments of music, work, or conversation, without the least attempt at interference on the part of the other. But were his eyes directed to the novelty, Sir Lyster's sole remark would be, that either his wife was sulky or his guest was sleepy; there could be no other reason for the change. The change, indeed, palpable enough from the beginning to such as were sufficiently on the *qui vive* to assign a cause for it, becomes, ere many days have passed over their heads, but too apparent to those whom it immediately concerns.

Lady Gwynne and Auberon Slade meet as usual; they even sit together for several hours in the day (for Daisy is suffi-

ciently recovered by this time to be carried out into the garden, and laid upon a sofa beneath the walnut trees), but they neither speak to, nor look at, nor confide in one another as they used to do.

All seems changed between them; they love, if possible, more passionately than they loved before, but (with the knowledge of it) the sunshine has faded out of their existence. They no longer speak of, nor compare their feelings; they have stripped them too bare; shame has invaded their intercourse; and they are afraid of themselves, and of each other.

The verse he reads so eloquently, and which carried so sweet a meaning to each heart, before those hearts had been dissected, now only brings a burning blush into her cheek, and makes his voice falter; the hands which used to lie so fondly in each other, neither trembling nor striving to disengage themselves, now hot and thrilling, meet for a hurried moment, and, as though the contact pained them, unlock by violence, and are free.

Their converse, too, no longer full of the bright hope they once cherished of an innocent and eternal friendship, has become vapid and commonplace; for the past is a forbidden subject; of the present they have nothing to relate; and the future is a dark mystery which will not bear investigation.

When they do talk together and alone, it is in voices sad and subdued, like a mournful echo of past happiness; or the complaint of souls, utterly bowed down by the hopeless misery that stretches out before them.

Sometimes her tone is so quietly despairing, that, at the risk of again provoking her remorse and incurring her reproaches, Auberon Slade feels bound, by the passion with which he has inspired her, to pour unhallowed balm into her breast, by the reiteration of his unalterable love. At others, it is his voice that shakes her to the very soul, making her almost believe it but the reparation which she owes him, to cast herself at his feet, with the fond assurance that she is his and his only, and he may do with her, and with her life, as he thinks fit. For, with the confession of their mutual love, another great change has passed over, and become patent to them both—they have stepped into each other's places.

She, who was the mentor and the head by acknowledgment of her weakness, has placed herself beneath him; whilst he, by right of conquest, becomes lord and master.

No longer is her voice heard in counsel or reproof; henceforth she believes her part is to comfort and submit; and she feels his influence gaining fresh power over her every day, and, figuratively speaking, is content to sit at his feet like a little child and learn. Humility, particularly if late acquired, is one of the best proofs of earnest love; no true adorer ever yet considered himself superior to the creature whom he worships; and when he finds it out, it is the first symptom of his decreasing passion.

With Auberon Slade's attachment has sprung up the manly intuition to protect and cherish the woman who is ready to risk everything for him; but he still considers her (and will do so to his life's end) as infinitely above himself in every respect. And so they sit by each other's side, day after day, moody and almost silent, except when the topic is perfectly irrelevant to that which engrosses both their hearts; and should it wander round to anything approaching it, it is checked by a deep sigh.

But it is impossible that such a state of affairs can go on for ever, and after a week of silent misery, Lady Gwynne is the first to broach the subject of their distress.

"Auberon!"—(they have not ceased to call each other by their Christian names, the alteration would have been too apparent)—"a great change has come over our pleasant intercourse; we are neither of us so happy as we used to be! Do you not think that, instead of brooding over what appears to be irremediable, it would be wiser to sift the matter, and try to find out if, after all, there may not be a cure for it?"

It is at the close of a long and weary day that she thus speaks. Daisy has been carried into the house to take her afternoon nap, and they are alone, pacing up and down the gravelled drive, but keeping at a respectable distance from each other.

At the sound of her voice, Auberon Slade turns, a sudden pleasure beaming in his eye; it appears to him as though he had lost, and but at that moment regained, his love.

"O Gwendoline! I am so glad to hear you speak of it. I have been so miserable, so self-reproachful since that day. I

feel as though I could never forgive myself for having left those wretched verses lying about."

"Poor verses! it was not entirely their fault. No! Auberon; there is no doubt about the matter, we have gone too far."

"I know it, I feel it!" he murmurs.

"And shall have to pay the penalty of our rashness? But thank God it is not too late to retrace our steps. We were very happy before, dear, were we not?"

"Happy! I should think so! O Gwendoline! whilst it was soul to soul, and 'nothing less,' I gloried in your love; I felt a better, a worthier creature for the knowledge that you cared for me, and took an interest in all I did or suffered, but now"——

"Let us go back to those dear days, then," she interrupts him, earnestly. "Let us be the friends, the brother and sister that we were before, and forget all about the fatal mistake we made last week."

"Child! is it possible?"

"Possible, Auberon? why not? Remember that in this life we can never hope to be more to each other than dear friends"——

"My darling, there is no need to remind me of that! Does not the bitter truth, like a mocking devil, haunt me day and night?"

He speaks so passionately, that she stops short in her career, and regards him mournfully.

"O Auberon! don't talk in that way! you make me so very, very miserable."

"I would tear my tongue out to save you a moment's pain, dear Gwendoline."

"Then why fret after an impossibility; why reject the happiness that God places within our reach to lament that which never can be ours?"

"Who knows?" he interrupts her, hastily.

"'My faith is large in time,
And that which shapes it to some perfect end.'"

Only a quotation, but it has the power to make her heart dance warmly; so quick is it to believe or disbelieve with him.

"Then why do you look so melancholy, Auberon? we can

still be friends, the dearest, nearest friends to one another, and thank Heaven that it allows us so much."

But he is silent; the hearty acquiescence that she waits for does not come.

"Oh, *do* speak! do tell me that it is not impossible; that we shall not be altogether separated."

"God forbid!"

"Auberon!" very gravely, and after a little pause, "do you mean to intimate we were not wrong?"

"I know we were, altogether wrong!"

"And are you not sorry for it?"

"Devilishly sorry!"

"O my dear! then what objection can you make to my proposal? There is but one alternative. We must either separate—never see, or talk to, or place confidence in one another more (Auberon, *could* you bear it?) or we must return to the footing on which we stood a fortnight since. Take your choice! Mine has been made ages ago."

"You know it," he exclaims, fervently; "your choice and mine, as everything that concerns us, are but one. I will be your friend, your brother, your servant, anything, so that you do not drive me from you—to despair."

"That's my dear, good Auberon," she answers, and her hand steals into his. "I knew that you would come to see things in their proper light. You have too much sense, too much good feeling, to waste all the hopes of your life and mine, upon a chimera. We shall be very happy again now; we shall write and read and sit together as at first, and never remember there was a moment when life looked otherwise to us than what it does. It will require but an effort after all; just an ordinary effort, such as any one could make, to detach our thoughts from that unfortunate occurrence; and if the remembrance should disturb us, we will regard it as though it had been a scene in some melodrama in which we both acted very well, but the repetition of which it would be impossible to carry into daily life. Shall it be so?"

"Of course; nothing could be easier."

She stops at that, and heaves a sigh.

"Easy or difficult, Auberon! it must be done."

"I am quite aware of that, Gwendoline."

"And you will help, not hinder me, in doing it?"

"I would lie down under the wheels of the next waggon we meet, and let them pass over my head, if you desired me."

"And you wish to keep me as a friend, Auberon?"

"I couldn't part with you, Gwendoline! it would be impossible. You have become part of my life."

A glow of pleasure lights up her pale features, but her voice continues steady.

"Then you will do as I tell you, and my affection can still be yours."

"For ever, darling?"

"O Auberon! how can you ask? Have I not given you my promise? Is it possible that any circumstances, any joy, any misery, can alter that? Life may change for both of us; you may marry, or even cease to care for me"—here he interrupts her with an earnest denial, yet she goes on, unheedingly—"but nothing that you can say or think, no faith or unfaith on your part, can do away with the sacred promises which I have made to you—which I renew this very moment; More than your friend I cannot—dare not—be, but your faithful unchanging friend I shall continue to my life's end! So help me God."

Carried away by the fervour of her feelings, Lady Gwynne stops, and raises her eyes appealingly to heaven, and in the shelter of the dusk which is fast settling down beneath the trees of the shady carriage-drive, Auberon Slade takes her in his arms and kisses her.

He has not done so since the day when they were interrupted by poor Daisy's accident; and by the glow that rushes through her veins, the faint, sick feeling that oppresses her as his lips meet her own, Gwendoline Gwynne might be warned of the sophistry of the new compact into which she has just entered.

But she is not; she only feels intensely thankful that the gloomy reserve which existed between them has been swept away; and the mutual confidence, which adds so considerably to his happiness, once more restored; so similar is true, unselfish love in all its bearings, whether its origin be innocent or otherwise.

The ice is broken; yet, after a little while, they seem none the happier for it; for the open discussion of their feelings,

and the improbability that they will ever be gratified, does not bring the cure that Lady Gwynne anticipated, and too often ends in bitter tears on her part; and in violent lamentations over the inevitable, or rebellion against the wisdom that had so ordained their lives, on his!

It is about this period that, probably from a vain hope of making him believe her not worthy of his regret, she seems to derive pleasure from exaggerating her own share in the business, and ascribing all the blame of a mutual fault to her love of admiration and desire to attract notice. It is useless for her lover to remind her that their affection had arrived at its full growth, even before she was aware of it, and that the final *dénouement* was the result of accident. She is quite sure that had it not been for herself, Auberon Slade's virtue would never have been endangered; and that she alone is to be despised, and criminated, and looked down upon.

"Of course it is all my fault," she will say, decidedly; "and any one who heard our story would make the same remark. I!—a married woman, and a mother!—what right had I even to dream of such a thing as love? The blame rests entirely with me; you will think so yourself after the lapse of a year or two."

"I am sure I shall do no such thing," he answers, warmly. "I have never blamed you, even in my inmost thoughts, and never shall; let the misery be double what it is! I ought to have gone away ages ago; I had no right to remain here, feeling for you as I did."

"You stupid boy! as if that would have made any difference! We should have met in town or elsewhere, and my insatiable vanity would have hunted you down, all the same! It is no fault of yours. Free and unfettered as you were, and yet fresh from a disappointment that had affected you very deeply, what more natural than that you should turn to the first offer of affection that was made you, for solace and relief!"

"But you never offered me your affection. I wrung the avowal of it from you."

"You read it in every tone and look and gesture (you told me so, remember!), and what can I have been doing with my tones, and looks, and gestures, to permit them to betray so shameful a secret? Ah! there is no excuse for me—none!

If Lyster were unkind to me, or treated me badly, as some husbands do their wives"——

"He *is* unkind to you! brutally so at times! and every friend of yours knows it!"

"O Auberon! how can you say so? I have everything I want, and a great deal of liberty; and if Lyster is rather rough at times, and swears occasionally, he has never struck me"——

"Struck you!—by heavens! I should hope not. He will have to settle an account with me the day he does that! But I tell you, Gwendoline, that he behaves brutally to you; that there has not been a man at Felton Hall, during the shooting season, who has not observed and commented upon it; and that I feel sometimes as though I could not sit in the same room with him, and not give him my opinion of his conduct!"

"O Auberon! Auberon! think what you are saying! Would you put an end to our friendship at once and for ever?"

"Then I must leave this place before I have entirely lost my patience with him—or I shall be kicking him before I know what I am about, and then there will be a regular shindy."

"And you would desert me then, and leave me without a soul to turn to; to bear all my troubles alone as I best may? Oh! how I wish that we had never met!"

But he is at her feet, drying her tears, entreating her pardon for his hasty words, and promising to be more patient for the future, and to think as well of her husband as it is in his power to do.

"Look at me!" cries Lady Gwynne, as she smiles upon him through her glistening tears; "am I worth all the worry and distress you go through on my account? Six-and-twenty years of age, and looking thirty if I look a day! Without beauty, without genius, without anything in particular to recommend me to your notice, what is there in me that fascinates you, unless it be the knowledge of that love which was not of my own seeking—and I could not part with if I would?"

"I neither know nor care," is the impassioned answer; "I only feel that I adore you; that you captivate me as no

other woman has ever done before; and that you can do so without the aid of any especial beauty, or genius, or accomplishment, is a proof that your influence will last for ever. If I love you for nothing that you have, I cannot unlove you for anything you may lose. It is yourself, my Gwendoline, yourself that holds me captive, and must do so as long as you and I continue."

"O Auberon! dearest, don't talk like that; you do make me so wretched; you take away all the hope I possess of living to see you cured. Indeed it is not I, it is a mere infatuation that holds you. I am a most ordinary woman, out of whom care and disappointment have driven the few attractions which perhaps I once possessed. There are dozens and dozens of girls, better than myself in every respect, who would be but too ready to exchange their love for yours"——

"Thank you! thank you very much! I will set about looking out for one this very day."

"You know what I mean; that if you would only try to look at this matter by the light of common sense, it would appear so different to you. You are wasting so much happiness; other people manage to enjoy their friendships without desiring anything more—and—and—there is no question about it, Auberon, we *must* do the same!"

"Who disputes it? I thought the compact had been signed, sealed, and delivered long ago! We *are* friends, Gwendoline, are we not? 'Only that and nothing more,' as somebody says somewhere. I'm sure I don't know what I have done to-day in particular to have earned such a lecture from you."

And Auberon Slade saunters away, leaving the unhappy woman to brood on her own thoughts, and thoroughly wretched until it is his royal pleasure to smile again; when many days will elapse before she summons up fresh courage to disturb his serenity.

CHAPTER XIV.

ON THE VERGE.

He finds great fault with her about this time for avoiding his company, showing an unworthy distrust, as he calls it, of his resolution, and absenting herself unnecessarily from home —for going, in fact, too often to church.

For Auberon Slade is just in that state of dissatisfaction with himself—of a full consciousness that he is not acting well or wisely, and a semi-consciousness that his rash indulgence can only end in misery for himself and Lady Gwynne —when he is ready to quarrel with any one—and especially with her—for trying to behave better than he is inclined to do.

But she will not give up her evening services, even for Auberon Slade, and day after day she flies to the little village church as to a city of refuge, and there, falling at the foot of the cross, pours out the burthen of her sorrow, and tries hard to persuade herself that she is content to take life as God has sent it; and that her own weak, sinful inclinations are not drawing her, hour by hour, closer to the brink of the pit, from which she believes she is trying to escape.

Lady Gwynne is not a religious woman, for were she so, in the strict meaning of the word, it is probable that she would have been granted strength to crush her love for Auberon Slade, even in the bud; and, at all events, whilst imbibing the divine grace that flows to us through the sacramental channels, and constantly reminded of her duty by the offices of religion, she could never have played so long and so heedlessly with the earthly fire which now threatens to consume her.

She is not religious, then—many good and pious people would call her just the contrary—but she has in her a depth of feeling, a power of devotion, and a capability of realising divine things, such as is seldom granted in this life even to those who have faithfully striven to perform their religious duties; such as will, at some future day, raise her erring but repentant nature to the sublime heights of sanctity.

Mr Laurence, who, having known Lady Gwynne ever since Sir Lyster brought her home to Felton, has recognised this great capacity for good in her, watched over, prayed for, and done all in his power to bring it to perfection, and has been proportionately disappointed during the last few months, to observe that her daily services have been neglected, is charmed to see her once more in her old place: her figure bowed low before the awful Presence in which she kneels, and her face humbly hidden in her hands.

He has always taken a great interest in the mistress of the Hall; he knows she is not happy with her husband, and he has shuddered to hear the light suspicions that have been breathed of her of late; now, he believes, all must be right again, that the danger—if there were any—is past, and God's goodness and her own sense of duty have brought her once more into a harbour of safety.

And in the solitude of his chamber he does not forget to return thanks for what appears to be an answer to his prayers on her behalf, and to entreat that the same mercy which has led her home may rivet her affections upon those things, unseen but eternal, which alone can have the power to satisfy so exuberant a love. Incense to God, offered perhaps in the eyes of the world too soon, but heard, accepted, and fulfilled, as such petitions ever are.

Meanwhile, could Mr Laurence look into the heart of the poor impenitent, who has become so regular in her attendance before the altar, he might also be tempted to believe that he had returned thanks prematurely. She weeps, it is true, weeps hot, scalding tears, for the sin and sorrow of the world, and the weakness into which each day betrays herself; and she prays, long and earnestly, that God may remove her grief, or reconcile her to it, or take her away where she shall never grieve nor sin again.

But she does not weep because her sin dishonours God and stains her bright baptismal robe afresh, nor is she ready to live on because He wills it, and kiss the rod that makes her a fellow-sufferer with Him.

Yet she is very miserable, and all the more so, because she feels with each fresh service that heaven has less attraction for her, and the world more; and yet, with the intuition of despair, she clings to heaven, and feels as though, were she to miss one evensong, she would miss God altogether.

And Mr Laurence often walks part of the way home with her, strengthening her feeble resolution to do right, by indirect allusions to such a case as he supposes hers may be; so that occasionally she arrives at the Hall almost in good spirits, and quite sure that it is not impossible to do one's duty in this world and yet be happy—the mood of all others in which Auberon Slade most dislikes to see her, for its hopefulness seems to reflect upon his discontent, and generally draws down a censure from his lips, which drives it all away. And then she, too, will begin to question the mercy which has hitherto preserved them, and blame Providence for the misfortune which has emanated solely from themselves.

"I wonder," she says, with her mournful eyes fixed upon the drooping, moody attitude of her lover, "why God ever permitted us to meet each other, Auberon! He must have known, from the very beginning, what would be the result of our acquaintanceship: that we should love, and be miserable, and tempted to do wrong; and yet He let us meet! It is very strange."

"Of course He knew it," rejoins her companion, sullenly; "and the parsons would persuade us that he doesn't like to see His creatures unhappy or sinful, and that at the same time He is all-powerful and able to rule the accidents of this world. What are we to believe?"

"I hardly know," is the melancholy reply. "He might have prevented it so easily, if He had chosen, might He not? Our meeting was not of our own seeking; everything seemed to go against it. And yet it came to pass. Oh! I am so unhappy! Why didn't He kill me months ago, and put an end to it! I would have died joyfully if my death had saved you from this misery."

"Darling! don't speak of it. What should I do without you! You must live, not die for me?"

"But He has permitted our love to grow and grow until it has become a part of myself. I want to love Him—I want to serve Him; but I don't feel as if I could love and serve Him without you, and I know that I cannot do it with you. O Auberon! save me from myself. I feel as though some invisible hand were drawing me nearer and nearer to the vortex of hell, and that I had neither strength nor will with which to resist it! Oh! be merciful, and leave me before it is too late. I would rather die of despair, than live as I am living

now;" and throwing herself on her knees beside him, Gwendoline Gwynne lays her head upon his shoulder, and bursts into an agony of tears.

Auberon Slade looks down upon the woman who has thus thrown herself upon his mercy, with a passion that is greatly purified by the protecting element with which it mingles.

He has no wish to wrong her; on the contrary, if it were possible, he would defend her chastity with the last drop of his blood, and he would give worlds at that moment if some one would only rush into the room, and say that Sir Lyster had tumbled down dead in a fit, that he might honourably wed his widow. But none of these convenient accidents ever happen in real life; and Auberon Slade really believes that, in taking this woman away from her husband, he shall be introducing her to such a state of felicity as she has never known before; and therefore he neither corroborates her fears, nor tells her they are needless; he merely strives to set the matter before her in a different light.

"My darling girl!" stroking the fair hair that lies against his breast gently as he speaks, "you take far too exaggerated a view of this sort of thing! I acknowledge that it is a great pity—that it would be far better if we could avoid it; but you mustn't believe everything that men like Laurence tell you on the subject. Marriage, my dear Gwendoline, is an excellent institution—I should be the last man in the world to deny that; more, it is absolutely necessary that, for the sake of society, and the keeping together of families, it should be strictly observed; but still, when all 's said and done, you know, it is only a social arrangement, and you will find nothing in the Bible to teach you that before a man and woman live together, they must go into a church, and have their hands joined by a priest!"

"But, Auberon!—the commandments!"

"My dear child! the commandments were made for the Jews! We might just as well say it is sinful to eat roast pork, as to swear by every little fraction of the ten commandments. Besides, they were drawn up in the days when every man had as many wives as he chose to keep, and not the slightest excuse for stealing his neighbour's."

"O dearest! you could never, never teach me to believe that you are right. The Bible speaks plainly enough upon the

subject: I want no further light than it can give me. I can only lament that such a warning should be needed by you and me."

At this he slightly moves his shoulder to one side, so as to relieve it from the burden of her head; and she perceives the action, and interprets it (as it is meant) into an expression of displeasure.

"Don't put me from you!" entreatingly; "I have no other home but this. The rest of the world is cold and dark to me; if you were to turn against me I should die."

"My dear child! you know how far I am disposed to put you from me! But this kind of thing must end some day—it cannot go on for ever."

"O Auberon! be patient and trust in Heaven! Everything must come right at last for those who wait and trust."

"Patience and trust! I am sick of the very words. The world is altogether wrong. There is no such thing as truth or justice in it."

"But try not to lose all hope, for my sake! Think of the lines you are so fond of quoting—

> "'Wait, and Love himself will bring
> The drooping flower of knowledge changed to fruit
> Of wisdom. Wait: my faith is large in Time,
> And that which shapes it to some perfect end.'"

Her soft, sweet eyes are smiling on him through her tears; her trembling lips whisper the words close to his own; her whole expression, her every gesture, is one of entreaty that he will spare her and himself not only the anguish that is in store for them, but the pain of recognising its approach.

But he is not in the mood for mercy; his eyes refuse to answer hers; he rises from his seat, almost impatiently, and leaving her still kneeling on the floor, walks up to his own room, and shuts himself noisily in.

Then she too stands upon her feet, and wipes her streaming eyes, and seeks her chamber, only to prostrate herself afresh, and wonder, through an overwhelming burst of sorrow, if she shall ever unravel the mystery of this world's tutelage.

After this particular conversation, Auberon Slade leaves Lady Gwynne considerably to herself; not of intent, perhaps, or with the conceived desire, by the assumption of a wholesome indifference, to bring matters to a crisis; but, simply, because he is impatient and fretful under the restraint imposed upon him

in her presence, and inclined to believe that a partial separation will prove sufficient to enable him to shake the feeling off.

And so he affects the company of Sir Lyster and the few male guests who still remain at Felton Hall; and he laughs a great deal, and smokes a great deal, and drinks a great deal; and leaves the woman, on whom he has been dancing close attendance for the last two months, to break her heart silently over his neglect; to spend long nights of wakefulness and weary days of solitude, until she is ready to accede to any terms in order that he may smile on her again; and would rather lie down in the dust beneath his feet, and let him trample on her, than live without the assurance of his love and sympathy.

She occupies her morning-room in solitary grandeur now, surrounded by the books and fragmentary scraps of poetry which so vividly recall the past; or listlessly wanders up and down the shrubbery, until the bell calls her to evening church, where, although all her prayers resolve themselves into petitions for cessation from her suffering, she tries hard to persuade herself that she is very grateful to have been spared temptation for that afternoon.

But her heavy glance, and wearied, languid movements, tell tales to more than one observer at the dinner-table, and speak volumes to the person whom they most concern, so that his looks soon follow suit, and two such forlorn pairs of eyes were never seen as, at furtive moments, filled with reproach, gaze on each other, and are detected only to be veiled.

At last she cannot bear the suspense and misery any longer; she who, in her unselfishness, imagines she is killing by slow tortures the heart for which she would lay down her life; and she entreats him, in a voice replete with earnest truth, to go away and leave her to her fate, so that he may but save himself the endurance of an agony which is worse than death.

They have met, almost unexpectedly, so scanty has their intercourse become, at the entrance of the shrubbery, and as her agitated tones and features strike on his ear and meet his eye, Auberon Slade draws her quickly within the shelter of its foliage.

"Oh! I cannot, *cannot* bear to see you thus; so pale and miserable and downcast, and yet striving to keep up an appearance of gaiety which mocks your heart and mine! Auberon! it must not—it *shall* not go on any longer—you will kill your-

self! Go! go at once, and never see me more; leave me to my fate! I can bear all things and live—so that you are happy."

"Leave you to your fate!—Gwendoline! do you believe it possible? No! you are right. This suspense must kill us both; for though I dare not stay, I feel that I *cannot* go!"

"You *must*, Auberon! I will make you! You must go home to-morrow—to-day—this very moment."

"And so I will—on one condition!—That you go with me, Gwendoline!"

But she does not answer him; and when he stops to inquire why her footsteps are so suddenly arrested, he finds her leaning for support against a tree, pale as death, and shaking in every limb, but with eyes fixed on him, gleaming with a light that tells him that his hour of triumph has arrived.

"Child! it is now my turn to say, you *must*, you *shall*, and I will *make* you! I do not ask it as a favour, I demand it as a right; you only give me what is mine! Gwendoline!" and his rich voice melts into a whisper, "you owe it to me! you, who have sapped my life of all its energy, its strength, and its enjoyment; who have turned a world that was at least hopeful into a barren wilderness, and cramped the efforts by which I was striving after fame! If you can desert me now, if you care so little for me, and mean so little by what you have said, as to drive me from you, despairing and alone, I shall never do anything to make my name a name of mark. With you—by your side—inspired by your love, I may work wonders; bereft of you and hope at the same time, there can be but one end for me—and I trust it may come speedily—the grave!"

"O Auberon! my dearest! my beloved! don't talk to me like that! I who would die to make you happy!"

She grasps him by the shoulder as she speaks—her lips with gentle violence press his hair, his eyes, his features—all the reserve of the last fortnight has flown in one moment before the terrible picture that his words have conjured up.

"Prove that you tell the truth by living for me! I ask no greater sacrifice at your hands."

"Oh, wait—oh, let me think a moment! My head is whirling, everything seems to be confusion. No! no, don't touch me! don't speak to me—leave me alone, for God's sake! I must settle this matter by myself."

She leans against the friendly tree that supported her before;

her eyes close and turn in upon her soul; her breath is drawn laboriously. Happiness and misery, life and death, heaven and hell seem trembling in the balance which mentally is weighed before her. She thinks of Felton Hall; of the many hopeless years she has spent there, silent and uncomplaining it is true, but bound to the earth beneath the weight of an uncongenial companionship—so distant that a huge barrier seems to be raised between herself and it, and yet so close that the very remembrance brings a shudder of loathing and abhorrence. She thinks of her wasted, barren life; the want of sympathy she has experienced; the gross passions to which she has been subjected; and feels as though she has been trailed in the dust until she is unfit for any lot but that which has fallen to her.

And yet, Auberon Slade—with his power of intellect, his youth and beauty, his sympathy with her feelings and misfortunes—Auberon Slade loves her, and desires her for his own.

O bliss! O happiness! Could earthly happiness, could heavenly bliss exceed the rapture of that knowledge; the certainty of loving, and of being loved?

As the poor, frail, sorely-tempted heart permits itself to linger on this dangerous delight, a vision of life as it *might* be, spent at his side, rises in her mind and intoxicates her.

A vision of day after day, passed in the certain consciousness that *he is here;* of having him at every moment to share her pleasures or distract her cares; to know, if he is sick, *her* hand has the best right to smooth his pillow; and that when she dies her last glance will be fixed on him.

But at the thought of death, the bright flush that has risen to her cheek, as her reflections culminate, fades back again, and Auberon Slade, perceiving that some question, adverse to his fate, has dared to intrude itself, takes her two hands, cold from agitation, in his own, and sends a warm, electric shock thrilling through all her veins.

It is an act worthy of Satan, who fears the soul he longs for will escape his clutches.

"You *owe* it to me, Gwendoline!" he repeats, softly. "Think—not of yourself, but of what my lonely life will be without you!" And then, referring to his own lines, he goes on, almost fiercely—

"'Do what we will, thy fate and mine are fixed ;
My life and thine inevitably mixed,
We take our destiny and do not fear.'

Is it your love or your courage that is less than mine ?"

At this she wakes—revives—and meeting his impassioned glance with a look of wild excitement, throws all consideration to the winds ; forgets honour, duty, prayer, everything, excepting that she loves him, and would rather go to hell in his company than to heaven alone.

"Neither ! Auberon. I have no wish, no will but yours. Build me up or destroy me, as you think best."

She casts herself upon him, and as he receives her in his arms, do the man justice to believe, that the sharpest pang of self-reproach he has ever experienced in his life, runs through the breast on which she hides her tacitly consenting face.

"Oh, my love ! if I could but save you from it ; but it is our fate, and my life shall prove the gratitude I feel for your devotion. Gwendoline ! tell me that you will never repent your generosity !"

"Oh, no !—Oh, no ! How could I ? It is *for you.*"

And yet the choking sobs which she strives to stifle on his shoulder sound like a bitter sarcasm on the happiness which she promises herself.

"When shall it be, my darling ? To-morrow ? Can you be ready ? I shall have several arrangements to make first."

"Whenever you please ! From this day I shall only live to obey your commands !"

"My own dear girl ! To-morrow, then, at three. Shall we go to Paris, Gwendoline ?"

"Anywhere you think best ! I have no choice !"

"Paris will be as good a place as any until the first breeze has blown over. Oh, my dear love ! the devotion of my whole life will be insufficient to repay you for the sacrifice you are about to make for me"——

"Hush !—hush ! There can be no debts between you and me. We mutually benefit and——wrong each other ! May Heaven forgive us !"

"It will, dearest ! depend upon it. It knows how great the temptation has been, and how sore the trouble."

She does not answer, but a slight shudder runs through the figure which is pressed against his own.

"My darling! I can't have you think of anything now, excepting me. Why do you try to disengage yourself?"

"Oh, let me go! I want to be alone!"

"And leave me so?" reproachfully.

She is back again, even as he speaks.

"Auberon! if I leave you, it is only to collect my thoughts. I feel ill and agitated, and in want of rest. Have I not said enough to satisfy you?"

"Of course! Do just as you feel inclined. But don't forget your promise, Gwendoline!"

"I am not likely to do so! But, Auberon—Auberon!" with an excited clutch upon his arm, "if this day's work is not to fulfil your hopes and mine, may God strike me dead before we meet again."

"It will—it *must* fulfil them," he replies, earnestly.

But she has quitted his side almost as she finishes speaking, and her light, fluttering robes are already sweeping the shrubbery paths some distance in advance of him.

CHAPTER XV.

SAVED FROM HERSELF.

With a vague notion that, once alone, she will be enabled to recover the shock which her own words have brought upon her, Lady Gwynne flies to the shelter of her sleeping chamber, and enters it with haste, but her footsteps are arrested on the very threshold.

For there, before her, straight in her path, as the angel stood to confront Balaam in his career of disobedience, stands the little table which holds her manuals of devotion, with the sacred crucifix suspended on the wall above it. How often has she knelt before that table, blistering the pages of her prayer-book with her tears, as she lamented the frailty and weakness of her disposition, and made fierce resolutions to do better for the future. How has she kept those holy resolutions? amended that pitiable defection?

She stands for one moment rooted to the spot that has been the altar of so many hopes and fears, gazing with a

wild, nameless terror at the image of the Sacred Body, to all appearance hanging so helplessly from the tree of death, and yet with the mighty power to save a world, even by the recollection that brings with it one sigh of faithful regret; and then, scared by the remembrance of herself, and of her promise, Lady Gwynne rushes away again, and slams the door behind her.

Downstairs,—not to the shrubbery,—not to the presence of him whom she has thenceforth constituted her protector and adviser, but out by the carriage-drive, and into the silent, green fields, where she can be alone and think.

There, with flushed cheeks, excited mien, and wild, bright eyes, she paces to and fro, walking at the rate of about six miles an hour, and quite unconscious of the extraordinary appearance her behaviour must assume to those who may see it from the high road, whilst she ponders on the fate she has carved out for herself.

She thinks of the morrow—of the hour she has appointed in which to meet her lover; that fatal hour, already so near at hand, which will for ever separate her from her home,—her station in society,—her child,—the company of all modest women and right-minded men.

She tries to imagine what it must feel like, to have lost all claim to be considered virtuous; to know one's name is bandied about in public, and the details of one's weakness made the subject for a leading article in every penny newspaper; to be pointed out as a *divorcée*, and become a pariah and outcast from all companionship but that of women who have fallen like herself.

Fallen!—pshaw! 'Tis the mere cant of the world—the name that men have chosen as a deterrent to the act! How can she fall lower than she has already done? What degradation waits her greater than the name of wife to Lyster Gwynne? She does not believe in it; such bugbears have no power to frighten her!

On one side, she sees love and liberty; on the other, abhorrence and despair! No alternative presents itself to her fevered imagination.

She pictures the fair life that she will lead with Auberon Slade; the scenes of beauty in which they will linger; the endless vista of peace that stretches out before them; the

loving dependence with which they will lean on one another!

And then he will rise! build up his fame, as he scarcely dares to hope that he will build it now, and she shall be ever by his side to cheer him on; to bear a humble hand in all his labours; and to exult in his success. And when she sees him, by virtue of his talent, moving in a higher sphere than that to which he has been born; bowed down to by the great and noble, and flattered by his fellow-labourers; how gladly will she retire in the background, and be content to know, without hearing it, that she reaps by right a portion of his triumph.

But will he so rise? be so received? As the doubt springs into birth, a pang shoots through her heart. Oh, if, instead of helping, she should be the one to drag him down! For herself, Lady Gwynne cares nothing. Scorn, contumely, and reproach would not have the power to provoke a sigh from her, if their sting were made harmless by her lover's smile, or their bitterness assuaged by his honied words of comfort!

But without that antidote, if he too should feel them, not for her, but for himself, what joy could life hold for her? She recalls the refinement of his mind, his extra-sensitiveness about trifles, the little courage or perseverance he displays in overcoming the difficulties in his path (she might, too, had she recognised it, have recalled the selfishness displayed even in his love for her!), and shudders at the thought. Was it, could it be possible, that at some future day Auberon Slade might be tempted, by ill luck or want of success, to turn round upon herself, and make the frightful doubt that has flashed through her mind a certainty?

Oh no! Impossible! Guilty and despicable in the world's eyes as she will soon become, God is more pitiful than men, and will command death to approach her in some more merciful guise than in such words from *him!* But here is the gilt stripped off the ginger-bread indeed; and as Lady Gwynne contemplates the mere possibility of so terrible a requital for her projected sacrifice, she stops short in her rapid pacing to and fro, and, sinking down upon the herbage of the rich solitary pasture-land which she is traversing, hides her hot cheeks in the long, cool grass, and gives free vent to the current of her sad thoughts. Oh, is there no possible alterna-

tive to a career of shame? no other means of escape from the net in which their feet have become so hopelessly entangled? no way by which she can save Auberon Slade from the horrors of remorse, and herself the risk of some day hearing from his lips that she has been the destroyer of both his earthly and his heavenly prospects? no manner in which she may yet send him from her, contented, if not happy?

She presses her grief-stained face upon the grass, and tries to solve the problem; but it is too hard for her.

She sees herself left desolate in Felton Hall, her only solace wandering about the paths which they have trod together, pursuing her avocations without interest, her duties without zest, and growing thinner and paler, and more hopeless, until death mercifully releases her from all her sufferings.

And then, she pictures him, sorrowing and alone, bereft (as he himself had said) of hope and her at the same moment; without an aim in life, sinking lower and lower in the world's repute, until he comes to curse the disappointment that helped to keep him down.

She could endure to contemplate the other fiction, for she is strong and lion-hearted, as the sequel will depict her, and able to bear any amount of pain that only affects herself—but this one is too much.

Auberon! who has never loved another woman as he loves her, who would live but half a life without her presence; was it possible that she could rob him of what he had rightly called his due, break her pledged word, take back her gift at the eleventh hour?

No! it is not to be thought of. She is no longer her own; she has given herself away. It is for him to decide upon her future fate.

Should he love her and care for her to the very end, she will be the happiest woman on the face of the earth. Should he tire of her (oh, pray! pray Heaven, that he never may!), she can but creep away from him and die (as she must die if she renounces him) in solitude and misery!

And she is so proud, 'midst all her humiliation and her shame, to think that she has a reputation and a name to sacrifice for him who has become all the world to her.

She meditates so deeply that she does not hear a step approach her through the rich thick grass, and when Mr

Laurence's voice strikes on her ear, she starts from her recumbent posture as though she had been detected in a crime.

"My dear Lady Gwynne! this is hardly prudent. The afternoons begin to close in so early now, and we had a shower last night!"

She rises immediately, and with considerable confusion proffers him her hand. She holds her head down as she does so; but Mr Laurence notes her crimsoned cheeks, and strange, disordered air.

"Can you find no fitter place for quiet thought, dear friend, than these damp fields?"

"Oh yes! of course; but it is so cool and pleasant here. How did you see me?"

"I was walking along the path on the other side of the hedge, and, happening to glance over, I caught sight of your figure. I was afraid at first that something must have happened. You have given me quite a fright."

"I am so sorry. It is evident you are not used to see me in my fits of sulks. You have been to the Hall?"

"No. I have just come from administering the sacrament to a dying man at the other end of the village. It was a most beautiful and impressive sight. I wish you had been with me."

She does not answer him, nor does she make the least attempt to progress in either direction. She only stands where she has risen, playing with the numerous trifles attached to her watch-chain, and keeping her eyes carefully fixed upon the ground.

"You are coming to church, I presume?" says Mr Laurence; "shall we walk there together?"

"No, not to-day, I think," she stammers—"that is to say"——

"It is Friday," he answers, gently, "and I should like to see you in your place this afternoon."

But still she hesitates, and is evidently distressed.

"Have you any engagement to detain you, Lady Gwynne?"

Deceit is not one of her failings, and she blunders out the truth before she knows it.

"Oh, no! I am quite at leisure, only"——

"Only what?"

"I feel so awfully miserable and unsettled this afternoon,

Mr Laurence, and church is sure to upset me,"—and he sees the tears dropping slowly on her ungloved hands.

"If that is the case, there is all the more reason you should seek comfort where it is alone to be found, Lady Gwynne, and decision where it is alone to be depended upon."

She moves a little way towards him then, but her lips breathe no consent to his proposal.

"Come! you have often let me decide for you in greater matters than this. Take my advice now, and accompany me to evensong. I am sure you will feel the better for it."

"Oh, no! oh, no! indeed," shrinking backwards, "you cannot tell—if you knew as I know myself, you would not ask it!"

"There is but One can do that," he rejoins, gravely; "but I know, Lady Gwynne, that whatever trouble you may be labouring under—whether it be an affliction of your own making, of the tyranny of man, or the dispensation of God—I cannot do wrong in inviting you to seek ease and comfort and a settled mind before the altar, or in thinking you will not permit so old, and I may add, so sincere a friend, to ask you in vain."

She looks up in the kind face bent so earnestly upon her; she remembers that she may never so look upon it again; that this may be the last time he will ever ask a favour of her; and her good angel takes her by the hand, and propels her footsteps in the same direction as the vicar's.

He smiles as he observes the action, but he makes no comment on it; and, side by side, they tread the path that leads to where the bell is sounding cheerfully for evensong.

CHAPTER XVI.

A MESSAGE FROM HEAVEN.

Side by side, yet not together; in company, but alone; they walk silent and abstracted, each heart occupied with its own sad thoughts; and his, perhaps, the sadder of the two. For Mr Laurence has been watching over this poor soul with jealous anxiety for weeks past, and, but a few days since,

thought that he observed symptoms that his fears regarding it were false.

And how thankfully he would have acknowledged he had been wrong; have called himself suspicious, illiberal, and ungenerous; anything, in fact, sooner than have received such a confirmation of the dreaded truth, that Lady Gwynne has something very serious preying on her mind, as seems to be conveyed to him by the attitude of despair in which he has detected her this afternoon. For he is well acquainted with her character and disposition, and knows she is not one of those fiery and undisciplined natures, who care little what the world thinks of them, so long as they indulge their feelings by a vulgar and boisterous exhibition of grief. He has seen her suffering for years: putting up in silence and patience with petty indignities, slight neglects, and covert sneers that would have turned many another woman, naturally sweet-tempered as herself, into little less than a domestic fiend; and he has admired her forbearance, and prayed for her relief. And he feels that if Gwendoline Gwynne can cast herself down upon the ground, and bury her tears in the grass, like any impetuous unbridled girl, who has been disappointed in her first love, there must be something of very serious import oppressing her mind; some vivid danger threatening her safety. And as they come in sight of the church, whose portals stand wide open to invite all those who are weary and heavy laden to enter there, and leave their cares behind, a sudden conviction comes over Mr Laurence, that the golden opportunities are flying; that there is a stringent necessity for making an immediate appeal to this woman's conscience, and that much of the welfare of her future life depends upon the spirit in which she shall leave God's house that day. Which causes him, whilst in the sacristy, to offer up a prayer that something may occur in the evening service to touch her heart in the right manner, and bring her to those Feet that have never yet been known to spurn the contrite soul; and with the same hope and intention running through his mind, he astonishes the choir by suddenly changing the simple hymn that has been fixed for the day, to one which, ordinarily, they never sing except in Lent.

Meanwhile Lady Gwynne creeps into her seat, and sits down there almost sullenly.

She has been entrapped into going to church, but she has no inclination to pray or sing, for her heart is in a state of semi-rebellion against the Almighty for having made her life miserable, and encompassed her with temptation, and permitted things to go so far, that she has no alternative but to fly in His face, and outrage His commandments. She believes, or she attempts to believe, that He is hard upon her; that He has tried her strength too much, and caused her to pass through a fiery ordeal that not the best of men, even His own servants of old, had been found brave enough to resist.

And how can she, a poor, weak, persecuted woman, be expected to triumph, where they failed? It is absurd, unreasonable, impossible; and if what she is about to do will shut her out from heaven, it will be Heaven's fault, not hers.

And yet above all the perverse reasoning of her disobedient and rebellious soul, she is conscious of a continual rapping at her heart—a rapping which she would deaden, if she could, but cannot; the knock as of One who waits outside, but will come in and sup, so soon as she shall open the door to Him.

Oh! open it, Gwendoline! throw wide the portals, lest the messenger grow weary and depart, never again to beckon you to heaven with that patient gracious hand!

The evening services commence; they are simple and unmeretricious, and not particularly calculated to melt a stubborn spirit into tears; yet, as they proceed, something in them—perhaps it is merely the resonance of the old familiar words; perhaps the thought that by that time to-morrow she will have forfeited all right to worship with her fellow Christians—touches the heart of Lady Gwynne, and her head sinks lower and lower, and tears find their way even through the clasped fingers that hide her conscious-stricken face.

Oh! is it possible she is about to give up all this; to make *him* give it up; that they shall never be able to kneel together in the sanctuary, and ask God's blessing on their ways and words and acts?

How should they?

The very horror with which she shrinks from the idea, proves the insult they are about to offer to the Majesty on High:—

"Weary of earth and laden with my sin,
I look at heaven and long to enter in;
But there no evil thing may find a home,
And yet I hear a voice that bids me 'Come!'"

The fresh young voices of the choir have commenced to chant the hymn that Mr Laurence chose for them; but though she knows that they are singing, she hardly notes the words, so absorbed is she in the fearful question that has presented itself to her mind.

No more prayers! How shall she pray for a broken and a contrite heart whilst living in a state of hardened sin; or for a blessing upon him who shares her guilt; or for a peaceful death that can but introduce her to that lot, reserved for all who die impenitent?

And then the Blessed Sacrament! Oh, agony! to think she never more may approach, nor feed upon the Bread of Everlasting Life!

"So vile I am, how dare I hope to stand
In the pure glory of that holy land?
Before the whiteness of that Throne appear?
Yet there are hands stretched out to draw me near."

How foolish she is to think of it! These are, of course, some of the things that she must—that she has promised to —give up for Auberon's sake! He must be her religion, her prayers, her everything thenceforth!

She has chosen her fate; it is already irrevocable. She can only make matters worse by looking back.

"The while I fain would tread the heavenly way,
Evil is present with me day by day;
Yet on mine ears, the gracious tidings fall,
Repent! confess! thou shalt be loosed from all."

Oh! how hot and uncomfortable she has become; there must surely be a thunderstorm brewing in the air. The windows of the church are all set open, yet Lady Gwynne feels as though she could hardly bear the weight of her straw hat and summer mantle, and pushes the damp hair impatiently from her forehead. Yes, she once had wished—she had even tried to tread the heavenly way; her conscience can attest so far; but circumstances have been all against her. She is too weak to struggle alone, and she has had no helper.

Oh, if her poor mother had but lived! Can her parents be looking down upon her now?

> "It is the voice of JESUS that I hear;
> His are the hands stretched out to draw me near,
> And His the blood that can for all atone,
> And set me faultless there before His throne."

Is it—can it be possible—that It ever will atone for such a fault as she is about to commit? Oh! the ignominy, the outrage, the bitter, bitter shame that she will bring on all who love her, or with whom she is connected—on Auberon, and Daisy, and herself—and perhaps on others yet to come! The blackness of the crime to which she has consented, in revenge against her husband, and the life that Heaven designed for her, seems in her fevered mind to stretch out, through endless generations, and to involve creature after creature in its consequences, until it culminates before the Judgment Seat of God; and terror stricken by the picture her imagination has conjured up, Lady Gwynne sinks upon her knees, and with her face buried in her hands, remains dead to everything except the fearful beating of her heart, and the wish that she might quit at once a world in which she is no longer fit to live.

So she remains until the service is concluded; and then the sudden lulling of the choristers' chanting, and the sound of Mr Laurence's grave voice as he pronounces the final benediction, once more rouse her to a sense of where she is.

But she will not rise; she is ashamed to show her tear-stained countenance to the villagers, who will, one and all, comment on the reason of her grief; and the little congregation file out slowly from the sacred building, and she is still upon her knees.

Then the altar is covered up; the doors are gently closed; and, thinking she is at last alone, Lady Gwynne gives full vent to her distress. She has pent it up for several hours; she has fought against conviction, and tried to smile away her scruples, but that gentle Hand is still tapping on the portals of her heart, and she can fight and smile no longer.

The baseness of her ingratitude, the hardihood of her contempt, the outrage she would cast upon His mercy, are all vividly portrayed to her; and, penitent—abashed—remorseful—as though her sin had been already sinned, she answers the invitation of that pierced Hand, and throwing wide the door, falls prostrate in an agony of grief.

Her sobs resound throughout the empty building, yet, had it been full of hearers, it would have made no difference to her then, for she is conscious but of one thing—that she is alone with her own heart and Him!

But after a little while, the lapse of a few minutes only, a footstep pauses before the crouching form of the awakened woman, and a voice sounds in her ear,—"Do not stay here, my child! Come into the sacristy, I want to speak to you!"

She had not expected to see or hear him more, and she guesses intuitively what he is about to say to her; and yet she rises, almost with eagerness, and turning on him eyes that are half blinded with what they have gone through, places her hot, trembling hand in his, and ejaculates, in a solemn whisper, —"Oh! save me, for God's sake!"

He makes no answer, except by leading her up the aisle, and into the small, bare room, containing only a deal table and a couple of chairs, which he calls his sacristy, and having entered which, he closes the door carefully behind them. And then he places her in a seat, for her limbs are failing, and she scarcely seems capable of finding one for herself; and taking a chair opposite, waits patiently until she shall see fit to unburden her mind to him.

But Lady Gwynne only casts herself across the table, in an attitude of the deepest despair, and five—ten minutes have elapsed, and yet she still continues to sob upon her outstretched arms.

"Well, my child! and from what am I to save you?" demanded the kind, fatherly voice at last.

"From myself," she answers, hoarsely.

"And in what way?" But to this question there is no reply.

"This is no time nor place for reserve between us," says Mr Laurence, presently; "and I know you will forgive an old friend, like myself, for telling you that I have long observed your weakness and distress, and feared that it might lead to evil consequences."

"Ah! you cannot tell how evil."

"I can guess, my child! Do you imagine that because it is my duty to point out the path that leads to perfection to my fellow-men, I must therefore have forgotten what it is to sin myself? I wish to God I had."

She glances up into the calm face that is regarding her with looks of such intense compassion; she marks the serious

glance, the humble reverence, the holy sympathy; and feeling as though an angel had been sent from heaven to direct her in the right way, springs from her seat with a sudden cry, and casts herself upon the ground before him.

"No! no! dear Lady Gwynne! not there!"

"Yes! yes! here; where else should I be, but at the feet I am not worthy to embrace? Oh! save me! save me from myself. You think you know—but you can never, *never* guess, how wicked I have been."

"But you repent!"

"No—no!—I cannot repent; there is no repentance in me. If you rescue me you must do it by force, and you must do it to-day—to-morrow will be too late!"

"*To-morrow!*" He almosts staggers back beneath the thought.

"Yes—I am on the point of committing an awful crime. Oh! if you could but save me."

"You shall be saved," he answers, solemnly, "though not by me. There hangs your Deliverer, and the Deliverer of the whole world," pointing to the crucifix which forms the solitary ornament of the bare room that holds them.

"I dare not look at It," she murmurs, with a shudder.

"But you must—you shall look at It. Look at It, as the poisoned Israelites gazed at the brazen serpent; cling to It, as the drowning man clings to the spar that is his only chance of safety; embrace It, as the sick and polluted embraced the garments of their Lord. I cannot help you else."

"I dare not! I have cut myself off from It, and all Its promises for evermore. Hope is over for me—I am not worthy—I have gone too far!"

"And yet you ask me to rescue you," he says, with a look of reproach.

"Oh! I was wrong—it is useless; I have passed my promise, and I cannot retract! If I thought that you would permit the name of such a wretch as I am to pass your lips in prayer, I might ask you sometimes, after to-morrow, to pray for me, and—and—*all I love*—but it would pollute them—you must not think of it."

He tries to raise her; fearing her agitation should be too much for her strength; but she resists him, and, as he reseats himself, she is still grovelling at his feet.

"To pray for you, and for all whom you love," he repeats,

solemnly. "Yes! you have my promise, and, whatever happens, you may count upon my doing that, until the last day of your life, or mine. There *are* some, then, Lady Gwynne, whom you love—for whom, perhaps, you think that you are willing to sacrifice your happiness—even to lay down your life!"

"Oh yes! indeed I am. O Mr Laurence! if you only knew—if I could make you understand *how much* I love him, you would pity more than you would blame me!"

She has given him the loophole he desired, and he can say what he likes to her now.

"I can quite imagine it, my child. You love him so devotedly, so truly, so unselfishly, that you have no hesitation in risking his eternal salvation!"

"Ah!" she says, in the same tone in which she would have said it had a sharp knife been run into her side.

"In casting shame and obloquy upon his earthly career; in cutting him off from all the sweet and ennobling effects of domestic life; in dragging him downwards on the path of sin; and of finally consigning his precious and immortal soul, for the salvation of which the death of a God was not thought too great a sacrifice, to everlasting damnation."

"Oh, spare me—spare me!"

But it is not his object to tone, or soften down, the glaring colours in which he desires to depict her future to her.

"I do not speak of your own shame; of your deserted child; your forsaken duties; of the numbers that will be involved in the pain of your disgrace; because I know that to a distorted imagination and disordered mind, such crimes will but appear to enhance the sacrifice love calls on you to make; but I tell you, Lady Gwynne (and I stand here this moment as the messenger of God to you), that, if after the solemn warning He sends you by my lips to-day, you persevere in attempting to wrest from His Hands the soul for which He died, you will act a part worthy of the foul fiend himself, and for which you will be but fitly rewarded if that soul rises up hereafter in hell to reproach you with its eternal loss."

"Oh, what *shall* I do? what *shall* I do?"

"And putting aside the awful risk I have presented to you, what excuse could you find for so requiting the heavenly love,

the fatherly care that has pervaded your whole life? What earthly creature has loved you as your Lord has loved you? what care has so preserved you? what tenderness enveloped your existence? To whom can you owe so large a debt of gratitude, so great a sacrifice, so inexhaustible a fund of thanks? Who else has borne with you, suffered with you, bled for you, as He has?"

"O Mr Laurence! tell me, in God's name, what shall I do?"

At the tone of submission in which these words are uttered, all the sternness dies out of his voice, and his next sentence is one of unutterable sweetness.

"There is but one thing for you to do, my child. To take in your hand this love, this intention, this desire, of which, however sinful, God knows the value in your eyes; and give it to Him who gave up all for you."

"Will He accept it?"

"Accept it? It will be the sweetest offering you have ever laid upon His altar, for it is your all. Don't think I underrate the sacrifice or the obedience. I know the anguish it will cause you; but if it costs your life, it will not be too great a gift to give to Him."

She rises without aid, and stands by the table, steadily and alone; but Mr Laurence is almost frightened at the change that has taken place in her countenance. It looks as pale and as fixed as though in death.

"*I will do it!*"

She only says these four words; but there is a world of determination, and an eternity of pain conveyed by the voice in which she says them; and Mr Laurence feels the tears well up into his own eyes.

"God help you, my daughter;" and for a little space there is silence between them.

"I know," says Lady Gwynne, presently, but she speaks very slowly, "that you are right. I have known it all along. I know also that it is the kindest thing that I can do for him. But—but—it will kill me!"

He does not attempt to soothe her; he knows it is not the time.

"Even so! It is happier to die, doing the will of God, than to live the slave of Satan."

"He will never forgive me. He will think I do not love him," she whispers despairingly.

"If he blames you here, he will bless you hereafter!"

"But—but—he will be so lonely. No! don't look like that—I mean indeed—I mean to do what is right; only let me gain a little more strength, a little more courage, and to-morrow I will tell him all."

The priest's face clouds over.

"Lady Gwynne, to-morrow may be too late; God calls you to obey *to-day*. Sin is the cancer of the soul, and if you desire to live, you must cut it out at once; you must neither spare nor cry, but plunge the knife in to the very heft, and root out the deadly evil. Come, you are braver and stronger than most women, and will succeed where others would faint or fail. Let me see you call all your strength and courage to your aid, and regarding this sore temptation as a means by which you may prove your love to God, surmount it as a Christian should."

"Ah, you think so much too highly of me. For myself, I might be able to do all this; but you do not know what a pitiful coward I become, when the knife has to be used on him. O Mr Laurence!" she cries, casting herself again upon her knees before him, whilst a tempest of grief shakes her frail being to its core, "pray, pray, bless me! or I shall never have courage to go through with all that is before me."

He longs to give her the desired blessing; it is trembling on his very lips, and yet for her sake he still withholds it.

"Let me first hear you tell your heavenly Father that you intend to do His will, and cleave to the duties, however hard, that He has appointed you."

"Oh, I do! I swear it," she says solemnly, as, clasping her hands, she raises her pale face and dim eyes to the sky. "I swear before Almighty God, and all the company of heaven, that from this hour I resign all loves, all possessions, all desires, but such as are in accordance with His Holy Will."

"Then may He bless you, my child, may He aid you, may He comfort you, and in His own good time reward you for the sacrifice you offer up to Him."

He lays his hands upon her head; she hears him breathe a prayer above her drooping form; and then, without another word, rises, wrings his hand, fixes on him a look which, though

intensely miserable, appears already to have some peace commingled with its pain, and goes swiftly from his presence on her homeward way.

As she re-traverses the fields and country paths, her whole thought is, what shall she say to Auberon; in what words break to him the resolution she has come to; how write the news he must not fail to know at once. For that she should have the courage to tell her lover she has repented of her word never crosses Lady Gwynne's imagination; she believes his looks, his agony, his bitter reproaches, would kill her on the spot. Her only idea is, that once within the grounds of Felton Hall, she will creep to her own chamber, and thence, feigning sickness, write and tell him all; and that it is her firm resolve never to see or speak with him again, except as a mere friend. And then when he has gone—for he will go; he is too proud, too tender, too considerate of her feelings—(ah, God, she may not think of all that now)—to stay where it is not desired—she will come again amongst her household, as of old, and strive, Heaven helping her, to do her duty.

But as thus thinking, and shivering slightly from the reaction which has succeeded her fit of terrible excitement, she walks slowly up the dusky carriage drive, she meets Auberon Slade face to face, and evidently waiting for her.

"My darling!", he exclaims, eagerly seizing her hands in his own. "Where have you been all this time? I have been looking for you everywhere. What have you been doing? Not repenting your promise, I humbly hope," and his laughing eyes, confident, yet tender, seek her own.

But in Gwendoline Gwynne's excited imagination, she and Auberon Slade are no longer lovers and dear friends, but enemies, avengers, murderers, who would ruthlessly pluck each other's souls from the hand of God, and condemn them to irremediable destruction; and with that thought burning in her heart, she pulls her hands violently from his clasp, and bids him never touch them more.

"Auberon! I take back my promise; I take back everything that I have ever said to you. I shall never be your own."

He retreats from her, almost staggering beneath the unexpected blow her words inflict on him.

"Do you know what you are saying?" he gasps at length;

"do you know who you are speaking to? Gwendoline, you have gone mad!"

"No! no! I have been mad—mad to imagine I had the courage to condemn your soul to everlasting torment—but it is past—it is gone—I am sane again! O Auberon!" in a voice of plaintive entreaty, "be strong! and help me to be strong enough to do my duty."

"I see what you are driving at," he answers; "you have been thinking over the promise you made to me this afternoon, and you have not pluck enough, or love enough for me, to carry it through. Well! if it be so, I have no choice but to submit. I am at your mercy. My happiness, as you well know, is in your hands."

Her heart flutters; she is almost fainting; she raises her eyes imploringly to heaven, and angels gather round her, to administer the strength of which she stands so much in need.

"Auberon! you *know* it is not want of love for you, and I will not answer so cruel a doubt. But if you accuse me of lack of courage to fly in my Maker's face, and drag you down to hell with me, I plead guilty. I have not the courage, and I have foresworn the intention; I was on my way to tell you so when we met."

"And so I may consider it *une chose finie*, and that when I leave this place, which I shall do to-morrow, we part to meet no more, or to meet as strangers, eh?"

"It *must* be so," she whispers, hoarsely. "Oh, forgive me for the pain that I have brought upon you."

"Ha! ha! ha! It is rather late in the day to speak of that! It is much as though a man should contract a heavy debt, and being unwilling (*unwilling*, mind you, not *unable*) to pay, plead for pardon from the creditor's hand. But debts of honour are seldom binding, as I am well aware, with ladies."

"O Auberon! spare me!"

"It is nothing, of course, to mar the happiness of a lifetime—to rifle a heart of its best treasures—to promise to give everything in exchange for so gross a robbery; and then to plead bankruptcy to suit one's own convenience."

She stands before him, silent but trembling; her pale, suffering face, upraised to Heaven—"But you——I thought

better of you, Gwendoline!" And as he finishes the sentence, he moves moodily away.

"O Auberon! hear me for one moment. I am not changed, nor do I fear! I feel all that I once felt for you—but God has spoken to me, and I dare not disobey."

"Then you are quite resolved to disappoint me?"

"I am quite, *quite* resolved to do my duty, for your sake as well as my own! It tears my heart to have to say such words to you—I would rather die than tell you so, but I have no choice—*I cannot damn you and myself!*"

But he will not see it, he will not hear it, he walks impetuously away, and leaves her standing there alone.

"*Auberon!*"

It is like the cry of one in his death agony—it rings through the foliage of the long, deserted avenue; it forces him to whom it is addressed to turn and look at her once more—"Oh! my love! my love! don't part from me like this."

She holds out her arms towards him—she presses her face against his own—she stamps mad, impassioned kisses, born of despair, upon his eyes, and mouth, and forehead.

"Oh! God's best blessings rest upon you. God bless your heart, your soul, your intellect. God keep you safe and make you happy! and return your love for me fourfold into your bosom. O Father! leave me in my misery, desert me, condemn me to everlasting torture, so Thou but stay with him, and bring him to eternal life."

"And yet you will not stay with me yourself," he whispers, as their wet cheeks touch each other.

"I cannot—I dare not—*I have sworn it shall not be!*"

. . . . . .

"Oh, then, like those, who clench their nerves to rush
Upon their dissolution, we two rose,
There—closing like an individual life—
In one blind cry of passion and of pain,
Like bitter accusation ev'n to death,
Caught up the whole of love and utter'd it,
And bade adieu for ever."

. . . . . .

They gaze in one another's faces, wildly, hopelessly, fearfully, for the space of a few seconds, and then, as though the sight and the recollections it engenders were too much for

him, Auberon Slade bursts from her, and walks rapidly away; and she, with her thoughts fixed half on earth and half in heaven, and murmuring, "O Auberon!—O Christ!" falls unconscious on the spot where she has parted with him.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PRESENTIMENT FULFILLED.

An old woman who has been gathering sticks and chips for fuel at the further end of the avenue, and is hobbling towards the servants' hall to receive what scraps the cook may have to give her, comes upon the body of Lady Gwynne lying prostrate at the foot of a tree, and, giving the alarm in the stable-yard, in another minute half-a-dozen stout arms are ready to carry the mistress of Felton Hall into her own chamber, and lay her on her bed, but half conscious of what has befallen or is yet befalling her. And so for many succeeding hours she lies, apparently indifferent to all that passes round her, not stirring even at the sound of Sir Lyster's dreaded voice, as he noisily, and somewhat angrily, demands of her attendants "what the deuce is the meaning of it all;" nor attempting to return the kisses that her child presses so fervently upon her passive cheek. She sees, as in a dream, the misty figures that move about her bed; hears the conjectures that are whispered as to the probable reason of her illness; is conscious of being pressed to rise, to take refreshment, or to answer the questions put to her; and yet she lies there, silent and unresponsive, too crushed by her load of misery to care what happens to herself or others. And then Dr Stewart is summoned, who, divining from her general condition that Lady Gwynne has undergone some great excitement, ascribes it all to Sir Lyster (whose conduct to his wife has, more than once, been made the county talk), and orders her complete rest and solitude in consequence, for which his patient is proportionately grateful to him. But towards the close of the next day, she becomes feverish and restless, and appears anxious to learn what is happening downstairs during her absence.

"Did any one call this afternoon, Bennett?" she demands

of the loquacious lady's-maid who is attending on her; "I thought I heard the sound of carriage-wheels."

"Not as I know of, my lady," rejoins the servant, "but some of the gentlemen as have been staying here went away."

"Which of them?" in a very low tone.

"Mr Penryhn, my lady, and Mr Slade. They had the dog-cart as far as Leighton Station, and the spring-cart took over their luggage. John, he told me over night, as Mr Penryhn had ordered the carriage for himself; but Mr Slade he don't seem to have made up his mind till this morning, quite sudden like. Sir Lyster drove them over; he seemed terrible put out to be sure, to think they was going. There's only Sir John and Lady Cleaver and young Mr Norris left now in the house!"

"Quite a clearance, isn't it? Bennett! did—did you see the gentlemen before they went this afternoon?"

"Well, my lady, I did happen to be on the stairs as they was going down—for I thought I should like to have another look at Mr Slade, who is such a pleasant spoken gentleman, and has always conducted himself like a gentleman to me" (Bennett wishes to intimate here, that Auberon Slade has tipped her liberally for carrying notes to her mistress, but Lady Gwynne is too sad to smile at the dubious compliment her words imply); "but he didn't seem quite himself to-day, to my mind. He looked pale and hurried like, and whisked down the stairs at that rate, he was gone before I could draw my breath. Sir Lyster, he says to him, when he had his foot on the very step of the dog-cart, 'Do think better of it, Slade!' he says, 'and stay.' But Mr Slade, he just shook his head—so—and jumped in. And then they drove off, and that's the last I see of him; but I'm sure the house won't be the same now he's gone. He was such a merry gentleman!"

"Please put out the lamp, Bennett, and take your work into the ante-chamber. I think that I could go to sleep!"

Sleep! Ah, if this be sleep, God save us from the pain that keeps us waking! So it is over then! past! gone! they shall never meet again, except as friends! and it is her own hand that has done it; *her* voice that has parted them for ever! Oh! in that hour of patient, uncomplaining agony, what a fearful retribution for an act of virtue, does her regretful memory become! Gone forth to his own world without her; to learn to gather comfort and encouragement from other

smiles, to hang on other looks, to echo the sighs that burst from other hearts! Oh, if she could but recall him! In that first hour of knowledge that Auberon Slade has taken her at her word (notwithstanding that, at all risks, she would have remained firm to her resolve), Gwendoline Gwynne is conscious but of one feeling; a deep and unconquerable regret for having driven him from her. She knows that she is wrong; she feels that were he back again that moment, imploring her to retract what she has said, to act against her conscience and the counsel of her friend, to desert her child, outrage her Christian profession, and fly in the face of society, she would give the same answer that she gave him yesterday; but with the certainty that, for the time being, temptation is removed out of her way and his, the perverseness of humanity returns, and will make itself felt. She tries to think of heaven, and the joys she might have forfeited had he remained; of Mr Laurence, and his holy, fatherly advice; of Daisy, who (little cared for by Sir Lyster) would have felt so bitterly the loss of all her mother's care; but she cannot do it, she cannot fix her mind upon these subjects; they fade away to give place to vivid, torturing recollections of the scenes she has passed through with Auberon Slade, the love she has relinquished, the happiness resigned. She recalls his image as she has seen it, for three months past, in her morning-room, her garden, his own study; reading, writing, in conversation; gay, sorrowful, or pensive; but always—from the very first—sympathetic, loving, and devoted to herself!

Oh! why did she ever meet him?

As the question she has already so often put, both to her own heart and his, re-passes through her mind, there flashes on it, like a streak of lightning, the remembrance, hitherto unheeded, of the presentiment she entertained before she met him, that in some shape or other evil would come of their acquaintance! She *had* then been warned; she had been cautioned to be careful and circumspect, and she had failed to accept the lesson. Is this retribution her just punishment? Have their happy meeting, and their bitter parting, a meaning in them after all? How truly, how wonderfully, has that presentiment been fulfilled! How could she have forgotten it till now! She recalls the scene, the place, the actors. The foreshadowing of sorrow and of sin that seems to have been

revealed to her, the small attention that she paid to it! No wonder that his very name—(dear name! how different its characters look to her eye now!)—had power to thrill her, that she feared to meet him, that she said she felt as though some great misfortune were in store for her! And Major Calvert had asked her *how* she feared it!—how plainly the recollection of his words and looks, as they stood together in the window of the dining-room, returns upon her now—and if it were by death, and she had answered, "Yes," she thought it was. And is she not dead—as good as dead? Has not the best part of her died, beneath the knowledge of his love, and the impossibility of her enjoying it? What greater trial could there be, than to see a great good—the greatest good in all the world to her—held out for her acceptance, and be compelled to relinquish it. Ah! death, that can only kill the body (so she thinks), would be preferable a thousand times over to this mental death of mind and heart and energy—that is non-existence without the peace of rest. But Lady Gwynne is mistaken; she is still young to the sorrow of the world, or she would know that, whilst she retains faith in him whom she loves, she has not drained her cup of bitterness to the dregs. The cruellest, the most entire, the most prolonged of separations may be amended, since death re-unites us to all who have gone before; but when falsehood is made to do duty for truth, coldness for affection, and reserve for confidence, what shall atone for such a bitter change; for even heaven must be powerless to restore the love that earth has worn threadbare. And as yet, Lady Gwynne has not this trouble to contend against, for her faith in the faith of Auberon Slade is boundless—illimitable: not because she knows herself to be *what she is*, but because she believes him to be *what he is not.*

In her humility, his love for her is a marvel, a mystery, a blessing to be thankfully accepted, but yet never to cease to be surprised at. And when he has praised her looks or actions, declared her fascinating, bewitching, irresistible, she has smiled fondly down upon him from the heights of her superior wisdom, and attributed all the sweet, soft nothings, which most women would so eagerly have appropriated as their due, to *his* goodness, and generosity, and overweening affection; to anything, in short, but her own powers of pleasing him. And for

like reasons, she has undoubting faith in his complete fidelity. He will suffer—perhaps he will reproach, and think her heartless and unfeeling; to fear so, is the worst part of her present trial. But he will never be untrue; she is quite sure of that! For she has taken this man, who—well enough as men go—does not possess one half the genius, or the goodness, or the generosity that her love attributes to him, and placing him upon a pinnacle of her own raising, has poured forth all the treasures of her great heart at his feet in such lavish profusion, that that which at first dazzled and bewildered him, has become so common, that at the same moment he is angrily resentful against her because she has not given him more. He commenced by wondering—as well he might—what he had done to gain and bind so vast an affection to himself; he ends by considering he is injured and aggrieved; nay, more, insulted by her presuming to point out his duty and her own. There will be another and a fuller climax to the thoughts of Auberon Slade, which he would do well to avoid whilst he can—the conviction that some women's friendship is better worth having than other women's love, and that he is mad who spurns away too hastily the blessings with which it is specially designed by Providence we shall comfort and sustain each other in our passage through the world. Let him call for them in that day, and hear no answer to his call; for sympathy, and union of ideas, and wholesome counsel, and all those helps without which some minds cannot live, but which love alone, without energy, or intellect, or appreciation, has no power to bestow. Oh, is there no good angel by his side, as he pursues his piqued and angry course, to whisper submission to him, and a hope of better things to come? There may be, but his rebellious ears are stopped against the warning. He laughs at the idea of time and patience; those two friends who, with the help of God, have power to straighten the most crooked path; his faith in them has gone—a trial of three months has wiped it out, and thenceforth he will fight the world single-handed and alone! So, in his proud resentment of its usage of him, he declares. Little does he think that he is about to cast away the weapon that of all others would have served him truest in the conflict—her strong, indomitable faith in his courage and his worth!

Meanwhile, the tears that fall from her sad eyes throughout

the lonely night are shed only for the pain that she inflicts on him. She does not dare to regret it, for she has a simple, childlike faith in her adviser, which tells her she has done the best for Auberon, as well as for herself; but she blames continually the weakness and the vanity that has brought him whom she loves to such a sorry plight! A desolate future stretches out before her—everything seems black, and gloomy, and uncertain; but she does not fear the suffering in store for her, she scarcely thinks of it, her whole mind is absorbed with one idea,—that he may receive strength and courage to bear his part like a man! And even in those first hours of her crushing grief, the hope will intrude itself that if they strive to be patient, and to endure, for duty's sake, all may come right at last. God, omnipotent and omniscient, can make it, if He so chooses; and how sweet will be the reward that has been earned by suffering, and crowned by His approving smile. And so at last she sleeps, with the tears wet upon her cheeks, and his favourite words upon her lips:—

"—— Wait! my faith is large in Time,
And that which shapes it to some perfect end."

Sleep on! poor weary heart! Sleep whilst you may; the grief you carry is nothing to that which is to come. But angels are watching, lest your strength should falter. Were one of them to speak, and tell you now that the man whom your affection has almost defied, is shallow, selfish, unworthy of your love, would you believe him? No! you will trust nothing but the evidence of your senses; scarcely that. Sleep on, then! it is not for long; the dreary dawn is breaking, and the moment for your awakening will soon be here!

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CHAPTER XVIII.

A FRESH ALARM.

On the following day, Lady Gwynne is down stairs again, moving about her household as usual; rather pale and languid, perhaps, but, to all outward appearance, anxious for

nothing, except to atone to her few remaining guests for her enforced neglect of them, and to avoid all allusion to the cause of her mysterious illness. At the dinner-table she meets Mr Laurence, who, having called rather late in the afternoon to receive tidings of her health, was induced, by the promise that he should see her if he remained, to accept the pressing invitation that Sir Lyster immediately held out to him, to spend the evening with them. She has scarcely been out of his thoughts one moment since they parted, and he is most anxious to ascertain in what spirit she has borne the trial through which he knows she must have passed. But if Mr Laurence thinks to gain any intelligence from the white, impassive face opposite to him at the dinner-table, he is very much mistaken, for the state of Lady Gwynne's feelings is not to be guessed from the calm, indifferent air with which she appears to regard everything that passes round her; and it is not until they find themselves standing alone in one of the windows of the drawing-room after dinner, that he fully understands the tempest she has gone through. Then, after a few commonplace remarks upon her illness and recovery, he ventures, in a low voice, to observe—

"I thank God that He has given you strength to do your duty. You have made a brave beginning, and He will enable you to persevere to the end."

But he is almost frightened at the ghastly pallor that creeps over her face.

"*Brave!* If you could but see me when I am alone!"

"The courage is meritorious in proportion to the suffering. Yes, I know that you have suffered"—(Lady Gwynne is biting her lip hard, to stifle the rising agony in her throat)—"but you have given a gift to God, which, though perhaps the best you had to offer, is still inadequate to express the gratitude you ought to feel towards Him."

"I have given Him *everything*," she answers, bitterly. "He can at least demand no more from me. My sacrifice has stripped me bare."

"*Bare*, Lady Gwynne! when you have your child, your church, still left to you? Oh, shame, shame! Take care lest you tempt Him to put forth His hand again, and make you acknowledge the blessings still remaining to you."

The evil spirit is conquered; tears are glistening in her eyes.

"Forgive me! Yes; I feel that you are right, and that I am wretchedly ungrateful. I will try, indeed I will, to feel more contented. Only—*it is so hard!*"

He knows how hard, for he has fought a weary battle with sin and suffering himself, but he will not tell her so. At this moment undue compassion is likely to weaken instead of strengthening her resolve.

"When that thought intrudes itself, my dear friend, call Daisy to your side, and try to picture what life would be to you without her. I know of no better advice to offer, nor remedy to suggest."

And before many days are over, Lady Gwynne has reason to recall his words. The first diversion to her melancholy is caused by Sir Lyster insisting that the whole of her illness is attributable to her going to church on week-days, and refusing to listen to any argument or reason on the subject.

"Stewart told me himself that your attack was due to overfatigue and excitement, and I should like to know what excitement you can find in Felton, unless it be running to church at all hours of the day. I never liked the custom. It has been highly inconvenient at times, both to my friends and myself, and I forbid your doing it for the future."

"Oh, pray, Lyster! think what you are saying. It has been such a comfort to me."

"Comfort! Humbug! Church once a-week is enough for anybody; and if you want to say your prayers oftener, why can't you say them in your own room? What's the particular good of praying before a bit of brass, and a couple of candlesticks? and if you must have them, why don't you light a pound of dips upstairs, instead of risking your health by exposure to a damp evening?"

"You know it is not that!"

"I 'm sure I don't know what it is, then, unless it's part of your religion to run exactly counter to your husband's wishes."

She could have told him what it was; the irresistible attraction of a saving doctrine which had drawn her, as his cold creed would never have had the power to do, from pleasant sin to the practice of unlovely virtue; which, in teaching her that faith without works is dead, had made her put her shoulder to the wheel, arrested her footsteps on the very brink of vice, and restored her to the arms from which he (blind

fool, and undeserving of the effort made on his behalf) is doing his best once more to thrust her.

"A woman of your age," he goes on, testily, "and a mother into the bargain—it 's perfectly absurd that you should go playing tricks with yourself as though you were seventeen. Pray, do you remember how long we have been married?"

"Perfectly!" with a deep sigh.

"Oh, you sigh, do you? You choose to consider yourself ill-used, because your husband takes the trouble to see that you don't ruin your health, and waste your time over such follies. You are going to act martyr for the benefit of the whole family, I suppose, and pretend you are kept prisoner in the house against your will! If this is part of Laurence's confounded teaching, the sooner he leaves off preaching sermons to you the better."

"Mr Laurence has never taught me anything but good," indignantly; "he is the best friend I have."

"Well, I advise you to make the most of the lessons you have received from him, for you 've heard the last of them, at all events on week-days. Laurence is a very good fellow at the dinner-table (I 've no complaint to make of him there), and an excellent partner at piquet; but if he 's going to teach you to set up your will in opposition to my wishes, the sooner we see his back the better!"

"He never did!"

"Don't answer me! You 've heard my orders, and you 'll please to remember them. No more psalm-singing on week-days."

"O Lyster! you cannot be in earnest. I will never permit it to interfere with my duties or your pleasures; but say that I may go sometimes, just when no one wants me, and there is nothing else to do. It is such a comfort at the close of a long, weary day to creep into church, and hear the service read."

But the mere entreaty turns his anger into rage.

"No such thing! I won't listen to it! Have I not already expressed my wishes on the subject? D—n it all, madam, one would imagine that your hearing was as defective as your sense. You 've chosen to lay yourself up with your confounded folly, and you must take the consequences of it."

"I have told you already that it was *not* going to church that made me ill."

"And I have told you that it *was!* And I tell you now that it shall not be so again. Do you understand me? or am I to be forced to lock you up in your own room, and disgrace you before the household?"

"You could scarcely disgrace me more than you are doing now when you talk so loud that every one must hear you."

"Let them hear me! I raised my voice on purpose! I wish them to hear me! And if you give me another speech like the last, I'll call all the servants, to bear witness that I intend to be obeyed by you."

Her lip curls, but she answers nothing.

"Ah! I've frightened you at last, have I? I thought I'd let you know which is master. Well! Now I've given you the lesson, I'll leave you to digest it. Good-bye," and as he concludes, Sir Lyster, with a mocking salutation, leaves the room.

She does not rise for a moment after his departure, but when she does so, it is steadily.

"*Fear you!*" she ejaculates, with a look of withering scorn on the closed door through which he has disappeared. "No! *husband*, I do not fear—I despise you. Wretched, paltry nature! I can read you plainly now by the light of a superior strength, and wonder how I ever could have been afraid of you! You—who fear yourself to cross weapons of argument with one of equal strength, yet have sufficient courage to oppress a helpless woman in the security of her own chamber; who would bully a servant, kick a dog, strike a horse—and yet cower silent before your fellow-men. I take shame to myself but for one remembrance—that I was ever coward enough to shrink before your anger, or permit your petty tyranny to embitter my existence. Henceforth, you may storm, flatter, oppress, or compliment; it can make no difference in my feelings towards you. My outward submission must be yours—make the most of it, for you will have nothing more; in earning my contempt, you have cast away the last remaining particle of my affection. O Auberon! is it thus that he would aid me to forget you? Is it for treatment such as this, that I have thrust your dear arms away?"

The bitter remembrance brings tears, and the tears penitence—but the feeling with which Sir Lyster has inspired his

wife that day will never wholly pass away. You may provoke a woman's anger, jealousy, indifference, or disdain, and find a cure for your shortcomings; but once rouse her contempt; do something which, in her eyes, sets you beneath herself and all the tenderest emotions of her heart, and she will never forget it. For her nature is to look upwards, and to adore; and the writhing reptile which she spurns indignantly, is never afterwards forgiven for having put her foot to such base use. The knowledge of this haunts Lady Gwynne; it distresses her. To shudder at his touch; to feel a weight when in his presence; to despise his opinions, and be indifferent to his welfare, is a grievous sin against the man whom she has sworn to honour, and the God who linked her to him; and yet she cannot shake the rebellious spirit off. She finds herself comparing everything he says and does with what Auberon Slade would have said and done, under similar circumstances, and of course, unfavourably—and then she tries to make up for her secret want of faith, by a forced exhibition of interest, and hates herself for the duplicity. She is open and true by nature; strong in the knowledge of her desire to do right, and fearless of consequences which would fall on her head alone: and did she, at this period, follow the dictates of her heart, would cast herself at her husband's feet, and make an honest confession of the weakness into which she has been betrayed. But she has not only herself to think of; there is Daisy and there is Auberon—both ready to suffer for her ill-doing—and she dares not contemplate the consequences of such an act to them. Sir Lyster would not forgive her fault, there is little doubt of that; for he has not the capability of according a free and generous pardon. His heart is far too small, his mind too narrow, and last, though not least, his sense of religion and of his own need of forgiveness too feeble, to admit of his doing anything so Christian and God-like. For herself, she would neither expect nor demand it; but what would happen to Daisy and Auberon, if the child were deprived of her presence, and the man once more possessed of it? No! she has struggled so far, and she must struggle on farther, and accept her unwilling reticence as part of the punishment due to her sin. Ah! the punishment falls heavy, even in those early days!

The loss of Auberon's presence—the silence, the blank, the aching void—are as nothing compared to the knowledge that she has caused him to sin, and burdened her own soul, as she believes, for ever! God, and her heart, alone can guess what she passes through in those first hours of sorrow, feeling that she must not only resign the one man, but cleave to the other, in thought as well as deed; and yet deprived (by his unnecessary harshness) of the means by which she would have become soonest reconciled to her unhappy fate. She believes, at first, that this last evil may be remedied, that she will be justified in taking it into her own hands, and claiming her right to join in the services of the church, when and how she pleases; and when she submits the matter to Mr Laurence, his answer disappoints her, for his advice is that she shall wait.

"Wait! my child! wait and pray; and in time this cloud is sure to pass from you."

"But the prohibition is so unjust, so mean, so evidently given with the intention to annoy me."

"That is why I am certain that it cannot last! God permits the sufferings that arise from sin to continue sometimes for years, because the removal of them might revive the same error; but I never knew Him fail to step forward to succour those who are deprived through tyranny of the means of worshipping Him! Trust to Him, Lady Gwynne; be patient, regard this unjust deprivation as part of your cross, and whatever else remains, He will remove it. You may take my word for it."

She takes his advice, and acts upon it; but she suffers tenfold in consequence, and Providence, in its tender care, lest she should sink into despondency, opens another outlet for the distraction of her mind; Daisy becomes considerably worse! The results of the serious fall which the child experienced, the immediate effects of which seemed to have been relieved by a few weeks' rest and attention, are about to make themselves felt; her brief respite from pain and weakness is suspended; the worst symptoms return, and Dr Stewart, after a fortnight's close attendance, asks to speak to Sir Lyster alone, and informing him that he fears some great injury has been done to the spine, expresses his disinclination to do anything further of his own judgment, and advises him to take his

daughter to London, and there submit her case to the best advice he can procure.

Sir Lyster is very averse to the idea, and inclined to believe that it is not at all necessary. He entertains none of those weak and foolish fears respecting an only child, of which some fathers are guilty; indeed, unless the truth is unwillingly forced upon him, he seldom remembers that he has a child at all. He takes no pride in the possession of his little girl, although she gives promise of great beauty; he was disappointed at her birth because she was not a boy; he has been disappointed ever since because she has not had a brother; and her presence disagreeably reminds him of both facts. Besides, she is tall, and strong, and stout of her age, and Sir Lyster cannot realise that she may be laid upon her back, a hopeless invalid, for the term of her natural life, and is never very ready to produce money which is required for anything but his own pleasures.

"Go to London at this time of the year?" he exclaims, "with Christmas close at hand, and the place a mass of fog—why it is out of the question."

"If you value your child's health, you will consider nothing but the necessity of her having immediate assistance."

"But, hang it! it can't be so bad as all that! Why, she was running about a week ago!"

"Symptoms have manifested themselves during the last two days, which make me regret I ever gave my sanction to her quitting the recumbent position."

"Well, she can be kept on her back as much as ever you choose; the more the better, I say, for she is always in mischief when below stairs."

"Mere rest would be now unavailing; the mischief has gone too far."

"At all events, it can do no harm to put off our visit to London till after Christmas."

"Sir Lyster Gwynne! if you would not see your daughter crippled for life, you will take my advice, and go directly. The necessity is imminent; after Christmas may be too late. I greatly fear there is serious injury done to the spine, although to what extent I am unable to say. If you will not move from Felton, you must send for Pollock, or Aberystwith, or some one skilled in these complaints, and let him see the child

at once. But, in my opinion, it will be a long affair, and she had best be on the spot."

Thus seriously admonished, Sir Lyster thinks it best, for the sake of policy, as well as decency, to do as Dr Stewart desires him, and, consequently, Lady Gwynne is ordered to see all things put in readiness for their departure. But he grumbles terribly over the necessity, nevertheless.

"Such absurd nonsense! at this time of the year, and for a girl, too! Don't believe that old fool Stewart knows a bit about his business. We 'll go to town, but if I find he 's led me on a wild-goose chase, I 'm whipped if I won't dismiss him the minute we return home. He shall never show his face here again. And I should like to know what *I* am to do with myself in London at this season? There 'll not be a man of my acquaintance left in town. If that obstinate mule Slade hadn't insisted upon leaving Felton so soon, we might have persuaded him to pass his Christmas there with us. As it is, of course he 's in Blankshire! hang it! everything seems to go wrong in this world!"

How surprised Sir Lyster Gwynne would be could he divine that, for the fact which appears so much to aggravate his annoyance, a thanksgiving, even in the midst of her anxiety for her child's welfare, is rising from the inmost depths of his wife's suffering soul!

CHAPTER XIX.

UNEXPECTED VISITORS.

Poor little Daisy is very patient under her misfortunes; children usually are so. She bears the weakness and the pain with a submission that astonishes those who have known her only in her wild, boisterous moods, and touches to the quick her mother's heart. For Lady Gwynne is ever by her side; night nor day does she permit any other hand to minister to her child's wants. At the call of this new anxiety, she shakes off the sloth and apathy that have of late oppressed her spirit, and rises to the occasion grandly, bringing all her energies to bear upon it, as though there were nothing else to

try her fortitude. She cannot fail to look upon it as a fresh calamity; she little thinks that it comes straight from heaven, a blessing in disguise. For it lifts her out of herself and the too fond contemplation of her feelings; it causes her to raise her eyes from the dead pleasures, lying strewn upon the earth like shaken autumn leaves, and sodden with her tears, and compels her to acknowledge (as Mr Laurence prophesied that time might compel her), that she has still some treasures left to lose. It kindles a new fear in her breast, invests her with a new belief in other hopes and other joys, than those which are linked with her relinquished love; and her mind, full of Daisy and the probable duration of her illness, has no leisure to sit down with folded hands, and mourn the unforgotten past. The wound still gapes; how could it be otherwise? a sword-thrust is not healed in a day; but it must gape, and bleed now whilst she goes on her way, unheeding, with scarce a moment she can call her own to stop and look at it, and touch it shrinkingly, and wonder if it ever will be cured.

It may seem a little mercy to be driven out of one grief by the immediate necessity for conquering another; but there is a sterner trial in store for Lady Gwynne, a wound that shall divide not only flesh and bones, but heart and spirit; and by this temporary distraction, she is gaining strength to meet it. It is as the lull before the tempest, or the interval of rest between the fiercer throes of pain; by it, she will learn to become strong; without it, trouble might engulf without ennobling her. So Daisy's mother is transformed to Daisy's nurse; and the child wonders why she should seem fonder of her than she ever did before, and hang over her bed with such tender looks, calling her "her only hope, her only blessing, God's best gift to her," and thinks, if this be the result of illness, she would rather never get well again.

In a short time after the issue of Dr Stewart's decree, Felton Hall is emptied of its inmates. Sir John and Lady Cleaver (who had fully intended spending their Christmas with the Gwynnes), being very full of sympathy for their friends' misfortune, but still more so for their own—and young Mr Norris (who is a great chum of Auberon Slade's, and consequently rather a favourite with my heroine) accompanying his host and hostess to London, where, having seen

them established in the hotel they customarily frequent on their visits to town, he leaves them to return to his chambers in the Temple. The first few days of change are unsatisfactory; for, notwithstanding all their precautions, the invalid has borne the journey badly, suffering much pain in consequence; and the time of the famous physician, Dr Aberystwith, being so much engaged that he cannot visit her for a week after he has been summoned, her mother's every moment is employed in striving to soothe the weariness engendered by confinement—a task which is not lightened by the ill-humour which Sir Lyster displays at the loss of his wife's society. But at last there comes a diversion in her favour; the great doctor's visit has been paid, and, although he hums and haws over Daisy's injured spine, refusing to pronounce a definite opinion at that early stage of the proceedings, and enjoins the strictest rest until he shall see her again, he recommends several things to soothe her pain, and alleviate the tedium of her condition. And, with her child more cheerful and at ease, Lady Gwynne's spirits even seemed to revive a little; and, although her inclinations would prompt her to remain quietly at home, in gratitude to Heaven, she puts compulsion on them, and forces herself to comply with her husband's wishes, that she should accompany him to various places of entertainment.

It is now close upon Christmas-day, and about a month since she parted with Auberon Slade. London is empty and dull in the extreme, and an occasional drive through the muddy and foggy parks in the afternoon, or a box at the theatre in the evening, are all the amusements the town is capable of affording her. It is a heavy heart she drags with her to those theatres, and a pale, sad face with which she gazes at the depressing farces and weary, spun-out dramas; but Sir Lyster enjoys the play, so long as it is something that he can easily understand, and she (notwithstanding that the contempt with which he has inspired her, is always there in its full force, to make her sicken of his company) feels that she owes him something in return for the unfaithful past, and is glad to be able to discharge a small portion of her debt, though at the cost of so large a penalty as this is to herself. It hurts her, even more than there is occasion for, to leave the dear child, who is growing paler and thinner with each

day's seclusion, to spend the long evenings on her couch alone; but she does it, almost cheerfully, trusting, that in consideration of the sacrifice, and the reason for which she makes it, her place by Daisy's side will be filled by a guardian more tender, trusty, and watchful than even her own mother can be. But the days are hers. Sir Lyster has his club, and a few associates left in town even at that season, and generally leaves her for the afternoon alone. And these hours she spends a close prisoner at her child's side, clinging to her, praying over her, entreating her to love her best of all the world, that she may lean upon the happy knowledge that one heart is lawfully and entirely her own. And whatever meaning the wild, incoherent words she often utters may convey at that period to Daisy's understanding, they sink in and dwell there, and lay the foundation of that deep, enduring attachment which ever afterwards exists between the mother and the daughter.

A child may not comprehend the cause of grief, but from its infancy it recognises its effects, and (with some prophetic instinct, perhaps, of what must come to it in after days) sympathises with them. Men and women may scoff at tears, but little children never do. Their tender souls have too freshly come from the hand of God, not to be the first to take part with those that mourn. So Daisy's ignorant, but ready sympathy comforts her mother, making her almost believe the husband's sins atoned for by the child's affection. She is thus engaged one dull afternoon in the first week in January, when a servant, entering abruptly, informs her that a gentleman, Mr Slade by name, is in the reception-room below, and will be glad to speak to her. At his name, pronounced thus indifferently, and without previous warning, her cheeks commence to pale and flush. At the knowledge that he is there, close to her, only waiting for her appearance, her very heart appears to stop its beating. Her first impulse is to rush into his arms—her next, to say that she is not at home, engaged, unable to receive visitors—her third, to remember that Auberon Slade is still her husband's friend and hers; and that after the prolonged and intimate stay he has made at Felton Hall, she can hardly, with propriety, refuse to descend to the drawing-room, and exchange a few words with him now. And the last conclusion is strengthened by

the entreaties of Daisy, who has had great kindness shown her by Auberon Slade at the commencement of her illness, and hails the knowledge of his advent as a diversion to the monotony of her present existence.

"Oh! is it really Auberon—dear Auberon, mamma? How kind of him to come and see us! I don't think he can know how ill I am. Do ask him to come upstairs and see me before he goes again!"

"I will, darling; yes, I will," returns her mother, in strangely hurried tones, as she rises to her feet, and under pretence of arranging her hair afresh, spends some minutes before the mirror, whilst she strives to overcome the sudden weakness that seems to have assailed her.

"How long you are, mamma! Your hair is quite tidy; why should you stay to do it all over again? And Auberon will be tired of waiting—ah, do make haste. He might go away before you get downstairs, and I want to see him so much."

The little plaintive voice has more power over her than her own cowardice.

"I will go, Daisy—I am quite ready now. And I will be sure to bring him up to see you before he leaves again."

She kisses the child hastily, and quits the chamber, but she is obliged to halt upon the gloomy staircase, and try to calm down the agitation that is knocking at her heart. Oh! why has he sought her out again so soon; it is thoughtless, careless, cruel of him; he might have given her just a little longer, in which to school herself to meet him as a friend. Yet, as she puts the question, her deceitful heart is bounding under the idea that he has found it impossible to stay away. She did not know he was in town, for since his hurried departure from the Hall, one short note, in which he thanked Sir Lyster for his hospitality, and desired his kind remembrances to Lady Gwynne, is all the news they have received of Auberon Slade; and she wonders if, having heard of their arrival, he has left Blankshire on purpose to encounter them. But she cannot stop to consider; if she delays much longer, he will think she has not the courage to confront him, so, casting speculation to the winds, and carrying a heart of which she can count every pulsation, Lady Gwynne hastily traverses the remainder of the flight of stairs, and without further deliberation, turns the handle of the drawing-room door. The

apartment is full of people, or so it seems to her bewildered gaze; but in another moment she can see more clearly, and discerns the figures of three ladies and an old gentleman, who have risen from their chairs to greet her, whilst she, imagining there is some mistake, is backing out again.

"Lady Gwynne, I believe?" inquires the gentleman, courteously.

"Yes—yes—I am Lady Gwynne—I thought—that is to say, I was told"——

"I am afraid that we must introduce ourselves, my old friend, Sir Lyster, not being at home. I am Mr Slade (I think you must have heard my name from my son Auberon), and this is my wife, Mrs Slade,"—intimating a very fat old woman, who immediately waddles forward to present her hand—"and these are my daughters, Margaret and Emma. I am so sorry to think we shall not have the pleasure of meeting my old friend Sir Lyster this afternoon."

She sees it all now—understands how (either by the servant's or her own stupidity) the mistake of her having heard but one name has occurred—and proceeds to make the best of it. How mad! how foolish of her to imagine for a moment that *he* would seek her presence again without a word of encouragement to do so! Her face turns very pale beneath the inevitable disappointment, and her lips quiver; but she says all that is polite and kind to Mr and Mrs Slade, and in another minute the whole party is re-seated, and engaged in what would appear to a bystander to be a most animated and interesting conversation. They are very different—father, mother, and sisters—from what she had anticipated (how seldom do the relations of our idols come up to the standard we have raised for them!), but they seem honest, kindly people, though rather homely, and her heart warms to them for his sake. The mother is short, stout, and rosy; so is each of the daughters, in her younger, fresher style; in Mr Slade alone, a slight wiry old man, with finely cut and rather prominent features, does Lady Gwynne trace any resemblance to Auberon; and it is to him, therefore, that she directs the larger portion of her conversation.

"We were only made aware yesterday, through the medium of our young friend Mr Norris, of your proximity to us," says Mr Slade, after the mutual surprise of each party, that the

other should be found in London at that season of the year, has been expressed, "or you may be sure we should have sooner availed ourselves of the opportunity of thanking Sir Lyster and yourself in person, for the great kindness you have shown our son."

"Oh! pray don't mention it!" replies Lady Gwynne, with the faintest of smiles.—She is longing to ask if Auberon is also in town, but she dares not trust herself to pronounce his name.

"Most flattering, I am sure! most unparalleled, and never to be sufficiently acknowledged," puts in Mrs Slade with a gratified murmur, "and coming from Sir Lyster Gwynne too; such an old acquaintance of Mr Slade's. Auberon's letters were full of it! and I am sure that to this moment he feels he never can repay"——

"I can assure you, there is no obligation in the matter, unless it be on our side. Mr Auberon Slade's talents are too well known, and his society too much sought after to—to—" but hear her voice fails her, and the rest of the sentence is lost in a stifled cough.

"I am afraid you are not very strong," observes the old gentleman, as he notices the painful discomposure of her address. "I trust that this visit to town has not been undertaken on your account."

"Oh! no! I grieve to say, it is entirely on that of my little girl, who met with a serious accident some time since at Felton Hall."

"Oh! not that dear little Daisy, I hope, of whom Auberon told us," exclaims Miss Slade, enthusiastically, with clasped hands.

"Yes! it is Daisy! I have no other child," replies the mother, sadly.

A general condolence is afforded her, with many assurances that her fears must be futile, and nothing whatever will prove to be the matter with Daisy's spine; and then the conversation works itself round again to Auberon.

"I don't think he can be aware of this," his father observes. "How grieved he will be to hear of it."

"Is—is—Mr Slade then in London?" says Lady Gwynne, forcing herself at last to make the inquiry, which has been trembling on her pale lips a dozen times.

"Oh yes!—of course—at this present time you know!" replies Mr Slade with a look of intelligence, which is checked by another from his wife.

She cannot recall what time it is, unless it be the Christmas season, which is a strange period for the owners of country houses to choose to spend away from home.

"It will not be long before he pays his respects to you, I am sure," continues Mr Slade, mistaking the reason of her silence. "He would have done so before had he known you were in London."

"Do you—do you make a custom, then, of spending your Christmas away from home? Sir Lyster was exceedingly annoyed that we were compelled, on account of our little girl's illness, to do so this year! It is the first time since our marriage!"

"Oh, dear no! This is quite an innovation. Nothing like spending Christmas in one's own house, and surrounded by home comforts; and indeed we did pass the day there, but you see Master Auberon's business has summoned us to town"——

"He is not ill?"—with rather too much anxiety in her voice.

"Nothing of the sort!—but perhaps—you have not heard"——

"Now, Mr Slade!" interrupted his better-half, authoritatively, "that 's sufficient. You must leave Auberon to tell his own secrets. I am sure, from all we have heard and he has written to us, that he looks on Lady Gwynne as one of his best friends, and will make her an early recipient of anything he wishes to be public. I dare say," turning to Lady Gwynne, "that you have seen enough of our young gentleman to know that he would not be over-pleased to find that he had been anticipated in his news."

The words and the manner give her the impression, that Auberon's displeasure is rather feared in the home circle; and that its members would do much not to provoke it, but she has little curiosity upon the subject. Either he has procured an appointment under government, or the secretaryship to a Member of Parliament (an aspiration he has confided to her); or he is about to bring out a new book; and so long as employment or success distracts his mind, she will rejoice

at it. But it can make no difference to her, or her sad heart; which has not even the small consolation of worldly ambition to recompense it for its loss. But what would his venerable parents think, could they read the thoughts that are crossing through her brain!

"Of course not!" she replies to Mrs Slade's remark, with a sweet, indifferent smile upon her face; "who would? and at this season, too, when it is so difficult to find anything to talk of. Have you been to see 'Caste' at the Prince of Wales' Theatre yet, Mrs Slade? It is first-rate; an inimitable specimen of modern drama. Sir Lyster has been three times."

"Is there no chance of our seeing my old friend this afternoon, Lady Gwynne?" inquires Mr Slade.

"I fear not, unless you will consent to take us as we are, and remain to dinner. I am sure Sir Lyster would be charmed to meet you again, but he is always at his club in the afternoon, and does not return till seven o'clock."

But the Slades are engaged, *en masse*, to a large party at their friends the Camerons, and find it impossible to accept Lady Gwynne's hospitable invitation.

"The Camerons, of course, having a peculiar claim on us," commences the old gentleman.

"Now, Mr Slade!" interposes his wife with an uplifted finger, "I have already warned you once."

"Well! well! my dear," deprecatingly, "I was merely going to observe"——

"Too much, Mr Slade, too much. I feel sure that you will let the cat out of the bag before our visit is concluded."

"Well, at all events the cat is safe for the present," says Lady Gwynne, who is amused at the controversy between the wedded pair.

"You won't have to wait long, Lady Gwynne, you may depend upon that. Auberon is a good enough son in his way, but still"——

"You must be very proud of him," she replies, her breast swelling beneath the knowledge that she, too, may claim some right to be proud of his achievements.

"Oh yes! his friends are very good; they make a great deal of him. But his papa often wishes that he had more taste for a country life. We seldom see him down in Blankshire."

"And now we shall see him less than ever, I suppose," remarks one of the sisters.

"Oh, I don't know that, my dear. It is more than likely that when Auberon is"——

"*Now, Mr Slade!* you are on the brink again. My dear Lady Gwynne, I must take him off at once, or I shall never hear the end of it from Auberon."

And with a prolonged hand-shaking, and many hopes expressed that they shall soon meet again, and entreaties that she shall visit them down in Blankshire, Lady Gwynne sees the last of her guests. As they file out of the room, and leave her there alone, she feels her cheeks are burning, and to cool them, stands for a few minutes beside the grimy window, looking down upon the street. Oh, the bustle, the confusion, and the dirt of the gloomy winter's afternoon; the shoving and the pushing that goes on in the dark fog, through which the sickly gleam of the early lighted lamps is trying to force itself. How they crowd and bustle one another; each striving to make his own way, without the least concern how his neighbour fares on hers. It is like a little picture of this selfish world, where, so long as *we* succeed, what matter if our brother break his heart, or fall! And to think that Auberon Slade and she are part of the motley crew; and that, at any moment, they may encounter one another, and stand once more face to face. She dares not think of it; she is not yet strong enough. He will not come; surely, he will make any excuse, plead any engagement, sooner than present himself before her, whilst every string of his heart and hers is still quivering from the rough jar misfortune's hand has caused them. And then she remembers Daisy, and returning to the child's side, consoles her for the disappointment of not seeing Auberon, by the assurance that he will soon be there; that Auberon's father had said he would, and that, whenever he appeared, her nurse should receive orders to show him up into the sick-room. With a mental reservation, that should that epoch ever come (as perhaps for the sake of etiquette it may), *she* will take good care to hide herself; upstairs, downstairs, anywhere, so long as it is in a corner too secluded to let the beating of her heart be overheard.

CHAPTER XX.

UNEXPECTED NEWS.

How very differently (in usual) things occur to the manner in which we anticipate them. The next day is rather a bright day—speaking comparatively—with Lady Gwynne. It is the occasion for Dr Aberystwith's periodical visit, and Sir Lyster, who has a wholesome dislike, not to say dread, of doctors, and everything pertaining to them, flies the hotel from the moment he is expected, leaving his wife to receive him by herself. It is not a pleasant ordeal for the poor mother to go through, for she has begun to lose all hope of hearing a favourable opinion issue from the physician's lips. For weeks past she has been hanging on his scanty words, and striving to detect a gleam of encouragement in his solemn looks, without success; and she fears she can hardly say what. But to-day her patience is to be rewarded; to-day, after a minute and lengthy examination, he delivers his oracular opinion, that though Daisy's muscular powers have received a severe strain, there is nothing the matter but what complete rest in the recumbent position will rectify. She must remain on her back, perhaps for several years—in her present state of rapid growth and development it is impossible to say for how long—but care, and time, and strict attention, will, humanly speaking, eventually work a cure. And to Lady Gwynne, who, from Dr Aberystwith's long silence, had begun to suspect that her child might never walk again, or even, perhaps, be taken from her, the verdict comes as a return of hope. What, in her eyes, are the trouble, the confinement, the anxiety, which such a prospect entails on her? What shall they be to her darling, so long as God spares them to each other, and she has the opportunity to lighten her weariness, and support her patience? Nothing! Thenceforth she will herself be Daisy's nurse, and governess, and companion, and mother, all in one; will live by her side, read, work, and play with her, until the dear child shall forget what it is to murmur that her lot is different from that of others. It is a blessed task that Heaven has

designed for her—has pre-ordained, perhaps, in merciful intention, to divert her thoughts from what has gone before. And, any way, she is thankful such a duty still remains to her. She meets Sir Lyster with a face beaming with subdued gratitude, and is surprised to find that he regards the matter in a very different light. He has felt but little concern at Daisy's accident and subsequent prostration; he feels as little now to hear there is a chance of her relief. If Dr Aberystwith could have made her well, indeed, at once—have set her on her legs again, and spared him the daily recital of the improvement or retrogression in her symptoms, he would have been obliged to him, for there would have been an end—or so he thinks—to pale, anxious looks upon the part, and calls upon the time, of Lady Gwynne.

But to hear that the best comfort he can give them is the intelligence that, after years of solitude and seclusion, his daughter may be able to take her place again amongst her fellow-creatures, during which period her mother will, of course, be dancing close attendance on her, is, in Sir Lyster's eyes, tantamount to the worst; indeed, it is questionable whether he would not have felt less annoyance at the news that Daisy's young career would soon be over; although, with all his brutality, he is not quite brute enough, when in an ordinary mood, to give vent to so unfatherly an opinion. But he throws cold water on his wife's new-born hope by the observation, that if that is all Aberystwith can do for the child, the sooner they call in some one else the better; and immediately turns the subject by the announcement that he has got a box for that evening at one of the theatres, where a new comedy is nightly drawing crowds, and she must order the dinner an hour earlier than usual, and be ready to accompany him. She would rather—oh! how much rather!—spend this evening, which seems somehow like the close of a Sunday, at Daisy's side, revelling silently in the hope so freshly restored to her, and forming plans for the new life they must begin to lead together; but she does not even hint at it. She only gives a sigh to her relinquished wish, and then prepares to make arrangements for her child's comfort during her absence with her husband at the theatre. The house is crowded; but Lady Gwynne sits behind her curtain, gazing abstractedly at the stage, often but half conscious of

what is taking place upon it, and never dreaming of inspecting the many bright faces and gay costumes by which she is surrounded. Not so Sir Lyster; who may be pardoned perhaps at this time for not finding his wife (however submissive) so lively a companion as she might be, and whose constant raids upon the buffet seem invariably to result in his meeting some one whom he imagined to be at the other end of the world.

Lady Gwynne hears of Lord Ashton, and Denison of the 10th, and Sir Harry Lorrimore, without exhibiting any violent emotion; but she is rather startled out of her passive demeanour, when, between the comedy and the final farce, Sir Lyster re-enters the box, with a companion in tow, and she finds herself face to face with Auberon Slade. Here—really here—in her very presence! and she had thought, upon a first encounter, to hide herself, until she had become accustomed to the cadence of the voice which she can no longer call her own. O God! stop this fearful trembling! She shakes from head to foot, as though she had an ague.

"Thought I 'd surprise you!" says Sir Lyster, jocularly. "Spotted the fellow half an hour ago, hid in a perfect nest of ladies, and bided my time to pounce upon him. Knew he 'd be out for brandy and soda before long. And he says he never heard we were in town until last evening! Are those the morals that you taught him, Gwendoline?"

"Upon my life I didn't," replies Auberon Slade, lightly.

At the tone of his voice she starts, gives a rapid glance towards him, and is still. What! no tremble, no falter, no confusion! Is it possible that he can meet her thus, and feel no pain? At the bare suspicion, her blood freezes in her veins.

"I hope I see you well," he says next, bending over her, and his face smiles—actually smiles, as he addresses her. "You did well to come to town, though I was very sorry to hear of the cause of your journey. The country must be horribly dull just now, all mud and leafless boughs, I suppose. There is really no place like London in which to carry off the effects of bad weather."

She does not answer him; she *cannot*, his indifferent manner is piercing her like a sword.

"Well, Slade, I must go!" exclaims Sir Lyster; "Denison is waiting for me. Shall I find you here on my return?"

"Certainly! if Lady Gwynne will permit me to remain;"

and as he speaks, Auberon Slade takes possession of the chair just opposite to her; "it is a long time—let me see how long—why, two months or more, is it not, since we have had a talk together?"

Oh! can he—*can* he have any recollection of that last interview in the drive at Felton, if he speaks like this? Yet she forces herself to say something in reply.

"I saw your mother and father and sisters yesterday, Mr Slade."

"Yes! so they told me! Indeed, it was from them that I heard that we are neighbours. My apartments are in the next street to your hotel."

"We had no idea of that!" she answers, quickly! "we always occupy the same rooms when in town."

"Ah—yes—very convenient—it's a first-rate place to stay at."

"We have no fault to find with it."

"Have you been very gay since coming up?"

"Oh no! Daisy's condition has been, and is still, exceedingly precarious," and there is just the faintest tremble in her voice, as she remembers how little interest he has evinced upon the subject.

"Ah, yes!—poor little thing!—so I heard. But I have been so very gay myself since leaving Felton Hall, that it is difficult to credit my friends have not been the same. I have been out, night after night—positively"—with a laugh that is intended to be very gay—"I don't believe I have spent an evening at home."

"Indeed! how charming."

"I was at a tremendous affair last night at the Camerons'. Perhaps my people mentioned the Camerons to you."

"They did—just mention them."

"They are great friends of ours, awfully rich, and keep first-rate society. By the way, I have something to tell you about them, Lady Gwynne."

"To tell me?" with quiet surprise.

"Yes!" and Auberon Slade begins to look just a little awkward, as he diligently affects to be suiting her opera-glasses to his own sight. "Do you remember, when I first went down to Felton Hall, my talking to you about Lady Mary St Maur?"

"Perfectly."

"What a calf you must have thought me, blabbing my love-

affairs to the first person I met. Pshaw! what fools we men do make of ourselves. I wonder how many more *affaires du cœur* I shall have to boast of before I die! But, if I remember rightly, you promised me on that occasion that, should I ever be in earnest in the matter, I might depend upon your good wishes for my happiness."

"I remember it also."

"Well! I'm really in earnest at last, Lady Gwynne. I've been thinking very seriously about the subject lately, and I've come to the conclusion that it won't do for me to go on any longer as I'm doing now."

"I don't think I quite understand you."

"I mean"—— (how very difficult it seems for him, to make those glasses suit his vision) "that it is quite impossible that I can devote my life to literature, as I fully intended to do, whilst I keep late hours and lead an irregular existence, and so—so—(what a beastly long time they keep us waiting between the pieces, don't they?)—well, the fact is—(you say my people told you all about the Camerons?)"——

"They mentioned that the Camerons had a peculiar claim upon them, but they did not say why."

"Well, the reason's plain enough; it's because I've—I've—in fact, I've—there's really nothing else for me to do—I've made up my mind to marry." A dead silence!—there is no obstacle to his completing the explanation he has begun. "And Charlotte Cameron has consented to fill the place. She's a very good kind of girl, who will see that I'm not bothered about household affairs—and make me quite as affectionate a wife as I care to have. In fact, the matter was settled a fortnight ago (I made sure my people would have told you about it); and I believe the wedding is to come off early next month. And there'll be an end to my bachelor existence for ever! Ah, well! there is nothing to regret in it. It has not been a particularly happy one?"

He has been rattling on, in a hurried nervous manner, in order to conceal his want of ease; and now he halts, that she may answer him. But the only answer he receives is an unbroken silence. The noisy orchestra has recommenced its *répertoire* of quadrilles, and waltzes, and scraps of operatic overtures, and the hum of voices rises from the pit and stalls below; but between those two, sitting behind their curtains,

and opposite to one another, not a syllable is exchanged. Auberon Slade wishes she would speak; that she would abuse, reproach, revile him; do anything but maintain this frigid, fearful silence. He recalls an hour, long since past at Felton Hall, when he had asked, half in earnest and half in badinage, what she would do when he was married; and had been almost frightened by the sudden change that came upon her face at the bare supposition. He glances, almost timidly, in that face now, but no such change has passed upon it, with the reception of the actual news; and yet it looks still more alarming, for they are the features of a statue; cold, fixed, immovable.

"Gwendoline!" he ejaculates in a low voice, but the sad, grey eyes, half veiled by their dark lashes, continue to stare straight before them at the drop-scene and the stage. "I feel there is some explanation due to you for this sudden engagement on my part," he goes on hurriedly, and experiencing a miserable sensation of discomfort the while; "but to myself, it appeared simply unavoidable. You know all that passed between us; it was quite impossible that it could go on (you acknowledged that yourself); and it seemed to me that the best means by which I could crush out the feeling, both in you and myself, was my marriage. That will, of course, put an end to it for ever. *Du reste*, however careless, I am not capable, and never was, of leading the immoral life that some men take pleasure in; and that, sooner or later a wife would become a necessity to me, was inevitable. And, having made up one's mind to a thing, there is no time like the present (philosophers say) in which to execute it."

Still, not a word! Her heart is beating so slowly and coldly and laboriously, that each breath feels as though it must be her last; whilst his is bounding and throbbing with anxiety, as though it would burst its bonds. Oh! that she would but speak, or cry, or redden, or do anything to make her look more natural. But, for all the emotion she displays, Lady Gwynne might not have heard a word that Auberon Slade had said to her.

"I expected you would blame me," he continues, rapidly opening and shutting the lid of her scent-bottle; "women so seldom view these matters in the same light as men; but you

will come to acknowledge some day that it is the kindest thing I could have done for both of us. It is not, as if we had the slightest hope of ever being more to one another than we are. And of course it was all very wrong and very sinful; and I was a villain ever to try to persuade you to think otherwise. It has weighed very heavily on my mind, I can assure you; indeed, I have suffered more than perhaps you would give me credit for; however, it is all over now, and I have put temptation out of my way for the future! Charlotte will make me an excellent wife—and I hope that I shall never forget my duty towards her."

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"It's awfully hot up in these boxes, is it not? You should tell Gwynne to get you one of those on the lower tier! They are twice as comfortable!"

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"I am sure, if I could make you understand all that I went through before I arrived at my present conclusion, you would alter your opinion about me! Well!"—with a sigh—"I suppose I must accept that, together with the rest, as a part of my punishment. Ill deeds usually bring their retribution with them!"

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"I wonder if Gwynne is waiting for me to join him! I expect he must be! I had better go and look after him, for there's an uncommonly pretty girl at the buffet outside. I shall see you again, of course, Lady Gwynne! You will permit me to call at the hotel to inquire after my old friend, Daisy?"

He has risen from his seat, and puts the last question so pointedly, that she seems forced to answer. But she only bows her head.

"We shall always be good friends, I hope," he urges; "we *must* be, not only because there is no reason against it, but for the sake of the past, of our connections, and the eyes of the world. There is no need we should cause an *esclandre*. *Au revoir*, then!" lightly. Her lips form something, it may be good evening or good-bye, but no sound issues from them.

He pauses at the door, and turns again towards her. "Gwendoline!" It is his last appeal, and she receives it as she has done the others. He looks at her averted face for a

moment, heaves a deep sigh, deep enough to reach her ears, and disappears. And she still sits where he has left her, with her eyes fixed upon the stage. Lie down now, broken heart, lie down and rest. You may still bound, and quiver, and melt, before life's journey is concluded, but the worst is over. You can never feel more acutely than you are feeling now!

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"A deuced bad farce this," exclaims Sir Lyster, bursting into the box, a few minutes after the curtain has risen, "and not worth staying for; every one says so, so let's go home! At least, let me put you into the carriage, for I suppose you're ready."

"Quite ready!" she replies, as she rises to her feet, and feebly searches for her various wraps.

"All right then; come along. Good Heavens! what a time you are. I've got Slade, and Denison, and Lorrimore, and half a dozen fellows, waiting for me down below. I've promised to sup with them at Simpson's."

"I need not sit up for you then?"

"Sit up! I should think not!—If you get up at a decent hour you will be in time enough for me. Now, here's the carriage; don't be the whole night getting in! That's it. Home!" to the coachman, and as Lady Gwynne sinks back upon the cushions, only anxious to close her eyes on everything connected with this weary world, she catches sight of a gay group of men, clustered beneath the lamplights of the theatre, with cigars between their lips, and light, loud words upon their tongues, amongst which, apparently the lightest and the gayest there, Auberon Slade is conspicuous. O God! that this were death, and life and pain indeed were over!

CHAPTER XXI.

THE FALLEN IDOL.

AND yet she reaches the hotel, ascends to her apartments, visits the bedside of her sleeping child, and permits her maid to undress and prepare her for her rest; and through it all, indulges in no look, word, or expression, that shall lead one to

believe she has anything of more consequence than usual weighing on her mind. Even when left to herself, in the wide, gloomy London chamber, without any auditor or witness of her grief, Lady Gwynne gives vent to neither sobs nor groans, but sits bolt-upright in her chair, gazing with a kind of tearless despair at her surroundings, and checking, with impatient pride, the heavy sighs that every now and then rise labouring from her burdened heart. I think that some may wonder that this woman, who fell prostrate to the earth when she dismissed her lover, smitten unconscious by the bare knowledge of her resignation, can ponder silently over the reception of what has been confessed to be far bitterer news to her: a consummation of her sacrifice, as deadly as it was unforeseen. But the solution of her conduct lies in the fact that her happiness was a free-will offering to Heaven, resigned of her own accord—her faith is being torn from her. The first act proved her stronger than she had thought herself to be; the last is a confirmation of her impotency. And the deep humility and want of self-reliance which gave her courage to tear her heart from Auberon Slade, find no place in the feelings with which she contemplates his endeavour to wrench their souls asunder.

Pride supports her!—pride, that he should remember so little of the promises he has made, the confessions he has extracted, as to speak lightly of that which he knows must be the death of her last hope, the hope of retaining his confidence and affection—to smile in her face, whilst he kills the only chance of happiness he has left remaining to her!

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"Then draw me closer—closer to thee, dear,
Do what we will, thy fate and mine are fixed,
Thy life and mine inevitably mixed;
We take our destiny, and do not fear!

"Yes! all of self has sweetly died in me,
Thy noble heart is beating in my breast;
No one shall steal it now—there, let it rest;
And know, dear love, that I am lost in thee!"

. . . . . .

And she had told him at the time, that those verses could never have been written for herself, that he must have mistaken his feelings, have said more than he intended! And

he had sworn (she can see his tender eyes beaming on her now) that if he were not in earnest then, he had never been in earnest in his life! Oh, can he be so weak? is it in mankind to be so pitifully weak as to forget, in a few hours, the emotions which have had power to bring tears to the eyes and enervate the noblest purposes? Can the offspring of repentance, which comes direct from God, be faithlessness? or a consciousness of wrong give birth to cruelty? Or—and as this thought comes upon her, Lady Gwynne rises from her chair, and begins to pace the room—or, can it all have been a lie, a base deceit? Can Auberon Slade have stooped to play upon her deepest feelings for the indulgence of his own? Oh, no, no, *no!* She will believe the worst of him—that he is weak, foolish, cowardly, unfit to battle with the world, or to rise above its troubles—but she cannot believe that he *intended* to deceive her. Ah! the worst pain is over now. There is no such pain in this world like the pain of pulling down from its pedestal the idol we have worshipped there! She has considered him so noble, so good, so tender-hearted, so far above his fellow-creatures, that it is hard to credit all at once. He is about to prove himself just a little frailer, and less generous, and less god-like, than the generality of men. She has wept for him, and for herself, until the fountain of her tears seems almost dry; but this last grief—a grief not for her own loss, but her loss of faith in him—conveys too great a shock with it to be relieved by any outward signs of emotion.

Auberon married! *her* Auberon, who but a few weeks back had told her that he could not live without her, about to be married, to blend his life with another life—whilst she, she is to be shut out in the cold and the darkness, and to bear no part in that domestic happiness! No! she cannot believe it. Disbelief is the next feeling that takes possession of her heart. It is impossible! it cannot be! he must have been in jest. What could he have said to any girl to induce her to accept him? And then a sudden knowledge of the deceits he must have uttered, the subterfuges had recourse to, the false protestations which must have passed his lips either to Charlotte Cameron or herself, strikes her imagination—and, with a bitter cry of anguish, Lady Gwynne falls upon her knees and buries her face in her hands, as though even in solitude she would

not let her looks bear witness to his degradation. For, with that remembrance, down comes the idol from his pedestal; falling like Dagon at the word of God, and disclosing the feet which had upheld him to be but clay. She loves him, however great her weakness and her sin; her heart is honestly his own, and will be so until her dying day—but he is not perfectly sincere; bitter as is the truth, she must accept it; she can never set him up upon that pedestal again, and his death would have proved a lighter trial to her.

"O Auberon!" she moans, "would it had been anything but this—and at this moment! God knows, I do not grudge your happiness, if happiness and honour can go hand in hand. But to think that you could *stoop* to this, to soil your lips and degrade your nobler nature for the sake of *any* woman, is the bitterest pill you have yet called on me to swallow!"

She feels no jealousy of Charlotte Cameron, who is as yet a myth to her, something in which she cannot make up her mind to believe, and of whom, if she does think, it is to pity; but her whole mind is absorbed in and weighed down by one idea, not that Auberon Slade has deserted her, but that he cannot have deserted her without deserting truth at the same moment. Would she, in due time, have grudged him the consolation of marriage—she who had driven him from her side with the fixed determination never to clasp hands again, except in friendship? Oh no! had he permitted years, months, the barest period which would have permitted him to say with truth that he could love again, to elapse, she would have been the first to rejoice at the restoration of his peace of mind, and to regard it as an answer to her prayers, and a proof that Heaven had forgiven her share in its former mutilation. But that he should rush at once—fresh from her arms, to those of a stranger—to repeat the same vows, the same glances, the same fond words; and then be able to look her in the face and tell her calmly that he had given that which she had—not scornfully rejected, but at the voice of God, resigned with bitter tears—into the keeping of another—oh! it is not a thing to be argued about, or reasoned over, or palliated; it is a bitter wrong and shame; a wrong to her, whose life is bound up in his own, and a shame to the divine nature which he inherits from the universal Father! Does he owe her *nothing* in return for all her tears, her misery, her

loss of him, and self-respect, that he cannot place restraint upon himself for a few months at least, and prevent this fresh outrage on her feelings, whilst the cup of bitterness he has helped to fill for her is yet undrained. If all that he has said, and done, and sworn to her, is false, can he so early have lost tolerance for her sufferings as to take pleasure in their augmentation? She tries to compare the Auberon of last night with the Auberon of six weeks before, and feels as though she were going mad beneath the effort.

. . . . .

"O idol of my worship! far too fair
In the great soul that flashes from thine eyes,
I triumph, that I win so great a prize,
I tremble, when I think how much I dare."

. . . . .

Is it—could it have been Auberon Slade who wrote those words, and told her they were true? Oh yes! she knows it was, and that whatever he feels now—whether he is fickle, changeable, and inconstant, or has too soon forgotten or tired of the past—he loved her once. He loved her when his eyes so tenderly melted into hers—when his hand sought her own—his head rested on her bosom; she shall never forget nor cease to believe in that; and her last thoughts that night are all tender excuses for his conduct, and determination to shield it from the world.

"Thank God," she thinks, "that no one knows of all he said to me; that not even to Mr Laurence have I betrayed his name. My poor Auberon, who knows what temptations and difficulties may not have beset his path; 'twere hard if all his friends turned against him as I have done. Perhaps he thinks he is acting for the best, for the kindest, towards me and himself. Anyway, if he is all wrong, or untrue, or cowardly, the consequences of his error shall not be aggravated by me.

"Who am I, to find fault? I, who would have dragged him down to the lowest depths of hell! Oh! my love!" with her pale face raised to heaven—"you have nothing to fear from me. I, who deserve less than nothing at your hands and Heaven's. Be happy if you can; my misery cannot be increased by seeing you at peace.

"Yet, oh! my God! if I could but be convinced that when he said he loved me, he was, at least, deceiving himself as much as he was deceiving me!"

Ay! it is there the arrow presses home—there that the weak flesh shrinks from the poisoned barb—the fearful doubt of his sincerity. And in this hour of suspicion Gwendoline Gwynne would bear twice the pain that she is bearing, to be assured that her beloved has not proved false to himself. But there is no voice to answer her, and she is not in a condition to appeal to others' judgment; she can only rest upon the memory of bygone days, and with a woman's strong, unreasoning faith, believe that such things *are*, because she wishes them to be. And even so, with her short, sobbing breath and broken slumbers, she is happier than the man who has attempted to deceive her; for, shut his eyes as he may to the truth, and delude himself with the ideas that "what can't be cured must be endured," and "one woman is as good as another," the memory of her sad eyes and eloquent silence haunts Auberon Slade throughout that night's revel, as they will haunt him for many years to come. But he has chosen his lot: let him abide by it. The lot that has been chosen for her may prove the happier of the two. And yet she has done nothing to destroy his faith in her! Ah! poor, bewildered, and forsaken Gwendoline!—forsaken, though not comfortless—who shall unravel the mystery of God's dealings with the children of men?

CHAPTER XXII.

HIS FRIENDS' OPINIONS.

Lady Gwynne hears enough of the projected marriage from that time forward; every one she meets has a remark to make upon the subject, and it seems to her as though, in communicating the intelligence to her ears, Auberon Slade had bellowed it forth to the whole world. The history of the rise and progress of his courtship appears to be as well known to his friends as to himself; the day on which he proposed, the words he used, and those in which Miss Cameron answered

him, are public property; and one would think, to hear how freely the topic is discussed, that there is something to boast of in being hardy enough to fix the destiny of one's whole life in a few hours, and to swear to love and cherish until death a creature for whom you did not care a snap of the fingers six weeks beforehand. The first instalment of misery under this shape, which Lady Gwynne is called upon to endure, comes from her husband, who can talk of nothing else over the breakfast-table on the following morning.

"I've got a bit of news for you," he calls out, as soon as she has entered the room.

"Yes! what is it?"

"Slade's going to be married! Ha! ha! ha! what do you think of that? Your ethereal poet, who was to live upon air and the sighs of his sentimental admirers, for the term of his natural existence, is going to take to mutton-chops, and buttered muffins, and a four-poster instead. Aren't you disappointed? Isn't it horribly unromantic?"

"He told me so himself last night," she answers, quietly.

"Oh! broke it gently, did he? Well, it was very considerate of him. I daresay he makes a point of going round, and breaking it gently, to so many head a day. He didn't take half that trouble with me. You had not been gone two minutes before he asked me to come up to the Camerons' box with him, and be introduced to one of the finest girls out. And so she is—slap-up—and no mistake about it!"

"You went with him; you saw her?" in a slightly anxious tone.

"Haven't I just said I did? Her name is Charlotte Cameron, and she's everything Slade represented her to be—just my style, lots of colour, and lots of flesh! I hate your faded, washed-out, wisps of straws; give me a woman who has something in her!" with rather a contemptuous glance to where his wife—grown considerably paler and thinner of late, and looking decidedly "washed-out" this morning—has taken a seat opposite to him.

"It has been rather a sudden affair, has it not?" she says next; "at least, I didn't think he had any intention of marrying when he was down at Felton Hall."

She cannot help being curious on the subject, although each fresh revelation seems to pain her more than the last. She longs so much to hear, or to be able to deduce from what she

hears, that Auberon Slade has been caught, entangled, betrayed into this engagement almost before he knew what was befalling him. But she is not likely to derive that comfort from Sir Lyster.

"Well, you don't suppose he would have told you if he had? It 's only you fools of women who go blabbing your love affairs to every one. For my part, and from what he said to me last night, I believe it 's been on the cards a long time. They 've known each other for years; the Camerons are old friends of the Slades, and there 's plenty of money on both sides, so I have no doubt it 's been a preconcerted thing; anyway, all parties seem very well satisfied with it now. Didn't Slade point Charlotte Cameron out to you? A fair girl in a blue dress—uncommonly jolly-looking, that 's what I call her."

"No! he didn't."

"Ah! he had no scruples with regard to me and Denison. It was 'Lotty this,' and 'Lotty that,' till the end of the evening; and then he treated us to a royal supper at Simpson's. He 's the boy to make the champagne fly, too; we had such a work to get him home afterwards. He 's a deucedly lucky fellow, that 's my opinion; falling into such a comfortable berth as the Camerons are sure to make for him, at his age, and without the necessity of touching ink and paper again, unless he becomes very hard up for something to do."

"Who are the Camerons, Lyster?"

"City merchants, I believe—wholesale tea importers, or something of that sort."

"Not in the same position as himself, then?"

"Well—they 're highly respectable people, and enormously wealthy. They tell me that Cameron's name stands very high in the city; and, after all, you know, a man raises his wife to his own position."

"True, if she is capable of being so raised."

"A man of my standing, for instance," resumes Sir Lyster, in his most pompous tone, "might have married any one. Whatever my wife might have been, in making her Lady Gwynne, and investing her with one of the oldest titles in England, I should have"——

"Yes—yes!—I know!" she interrupts him, hastily. She has heard all this vulgar boasting so often before. But Sir Lyster is not to be cheated out of his due.

"Had it not been so," he continues, "I should have been

compelled to look for high birth and breeding in the probable mother of my heirs."

"My father was a gentleman," she answers quickly. She is always ready to resent any affront cast upon the memory of the poverty-stricken vicar of Ynysced-wyn.

"Oh! yes, yes—of course—we all know that; but the world is very apt to judge by outward appearances. The Camerons are wealthy and influential, and the opinion of most people will be the same as mine, that Charlotte Cameron is an excellent match for a man who intended to make his living by his pen."

"But without the necessity—you say the Slades are also rich."

"Old Slade is not badly off; but he has several daughters to provide for, and I don't suppose that Auberon will come in for much more than the house and grounds in Blankshire. He knows what he is about, you may depend upon it; he's feathered his nest uncommonly well, the young dog! and got nothing to do with his life, but to enjoy it. I only wish I were he!"

With which complimentary conclusion, Sir Lyster, having finished his breakfast, leaves his wife in peace. But it is not long before she discovers that opinions run very counter concerning the great expediency of Auberon Slade's marriage, and that but few of his intimate friends can be found to agree with her husband. Amongst those most inveterately opposed to the idea is Mr Norris, who takes an early opportunity of calling on her, apparently with the sole reason of enlarging on the topic, which is so objectionable to him.

"Lady Gwynne!" he exclaims, in the most despondent accents, as he throws himself into a chair, "what *is* the meaning of all this; can you explain it?"

"Explain what, Mr Norris?"

"This marriage of Slade's. It is the most imprudent, foolish, mad thing he has ever contemplated doing in his life."

"So I should imagine, but Sir Lyster seems to think that Mr Slade is a very lucky man."

"Sir Lyster only looks on the surface; what can he tell of the effects that a fatal mistake of this kind is likely to have on a man of Slade's disposition? Lady Gwynne! I've known him for years—we were at school and at college together,

and have been firm friends ever since; we never had a quarrel in our lives; and I tell you seriously that this marriage will be the ruin of him; I know it will. He might almost as well cut his throat at once."

She is surprised at the sudden change in his voice; and glancing up sees that the kindly young eyes are filled with tears, and has difficulty in preventing her own from flowing.

"O Mr Norris! it is very good—it is very kind of you to feel for him like this; but what can we do? Mr Slade is his own master, and not likely to listen to the advice of friends."

"But what is the reason of it? what induced him to make such a fool of himself?"

"How can I tell?" but the deep blush that overspreads her pallid features, joined to the gossip of the Felton smoking-room, in part betrays her.

"What does he want with marriage at all; I am sure he had no thoughts of it at Felton; he was well enough as he was—and with such a woman too."

"But I hear Miss Cameron has great beauty."

"Beauty! She has *nothing*, Lady Gwynne, positively nothing—neither beauty, accomplishments, talents, nor birth. That 's the marvel of it to me. If he had chosen a woman who was remarkable for any one possession—we all know how men are caught, some by feature, and some by talent, and some by grace—but to tie himself to a raw school girl, who blushes if you are introduced to her—bah! it passes my comprehension."

"She may improve," said Lady Gwynne, softly; "she will develop." She does not know what to say, poor creature; she longs to sit down, and have a good cry herself, but a species of self-imposed generosity forces her to take the part of the absent and the abused.

"Develop!—yes! that she will, into five-and-twenty stone. Your common-bred women always do. O Lady Gwynne! you know the sort of wife that Slade (if he must have a wife) should have taken to himself. An indolent, careless fellow, fond of luxury and indulgence, and yet without an idea of restraining his expenses; who must needs, for the sake of his profession, keep open house for men of note and letters; and will require to see that house thoroughly well kept, and made

bright and pleasant to his friends, should have placed some one at the head of his table, who was fit to carry out his wishes. But fancy Charlotte Cameron doing the honours of a dinner-table! She is more likely to drive men away from the house than to attract them to it. I, for one, won't set foot in it after she is established there."

"But—but—I suppose Mr Slade has calculated all these disadvantages, and finds that his affection for Miss Cameron outbalances them."

"His affection! Why! do you imagine he is in love with her, Lady Gwynne?"

"Why else should he marry her?"

"Ah, that I can't tell you! I came to you to solve that mystery, you may remember; but I am quite sure of one thing—that he is no more in love with Charlotte Cameron than he is with Daisy."

At these words, a spark of pleasure is kindled at her heart, but quickly quenched again. She feels sadly now that hope, and grief, and pleasure, and all things connected with Auberon Slade, are illegal to her; he has cut her off from them; she is no more even his dear friend.

"How he ever came to propose to her is inexplicable to me. I suppose he had had too much wine, and does not know how to back out of it now! He asked me to be 'best-man' at the wedding, but I refused. I told him that I would just as soon go and see him hung, as make such an ass of himself. He winced a little at that, but there's nothing like plain speaking."

"O Mr Norris!" with perhaps a trifle more eagerness in her tone than is prudent, "don't turn against him! Remember, if he is about to do that which is likely to alienate him from his friends, how much more he will need the few that are left to him. And you have always been such a true, faithful friend to him; you have each received kindness from the other; you will not, surely, let such a little thing as this separate you now."

"Such a little thing! If you knew Charlotte Cameron, Lady Gwynne, you would not call marriage with her a little thing."

"Well, whatever it may be, the consequences will fall heavier on him than on yourself, and you will not make him feel them worse than he need do! He is so sensitive; he will be so very much alive to the world's ridicule of, or censures on, his

conduct, that if you care for him (and I am sure you do) you will not, by unnecessary coldness, increase the load he may have to bear. We have all so much to bear in this world, Mr Norris!"

"We don't all bring it on our own heads."

"Don't we? I think we do; or that, if we do not, it is not our fault."

"One would think you owed him something, by the way you defend his cause, Lady Gwynne!"

She starts so quickly and looks so pained that he corrects himself almost with an apology.

"I mean to say, that—considering all things—so long as he stayed at Felton Hall, and the kindness with which he was received there—I don't think Slade has behaved very well to you and Sir Lyster."

"In what way?"

"Well! if this engagement of his has existed for such a time, he ought to have told you of it."

"Has it so existed?"

"He says that, if not actually settled, it has been in his mind for ages past, and that he always knew that, sooner or later, it would come to a marriage between them, which is the same thing."

"But, Mr Norris—surely you know—it was no secret; the fact of his engagement to Lady Mary St Maur;—*that* was only broken off last season."

"What of it, Lady Gwynne? In these days of rapid motion—when we wear mourning six weeks for our nearest relations, gallop through the Divorce Court when we have been wed a twelvemonth, and marry again before our wives are cold in their graves—an engagement more or less, during the season, is of little consequence. But I think he ought to have made it public. A man has no right to go amongst young girls, passing as free, when his hand is already promised—or nearly so."

"Ah,—well," she answers, with a forced laugh, that would be so gay, that it is infinitely sad, "he had not much opportunity of doing damage at Felton Hall, anyway."

She will defend him no longer; for nothing closes her lips so quickly as, what she takes to be, another proof of his equivocation.

"I fancy I must have bored you enough on this subject,

Lady Gwynne," says Mr Norris, rising to his feet, "and must ask your pardon if it has been too much, but my head is full of Auberon Slade at present. However, I will bear in mind what you say, and try not to make things harder for him than they need be. He will find them hard enough, poor devil, before he has done with them."

And Lady Gwynne is left to ponder over what she has heard, alone.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE BRIDEGROOM ELECT.

It is not long before Sir Lyster has hunted up the whole family of Slades, and renewed his former intimacy with them, which leads to various appointments and invitations to dinner; and more than once, throws Lady Gwynne, sorely against her inclination, into the society of the man whom of all others she is most desirous to avoid. She has but just congratulated herself on her good fortune, when upon returning to her hotel one day, she hears that he has called during her absence, and been received by Daisy, who is eloquent on the subject of "dear Auberon's" kindness and generosity (evidenced by the production of a large wax doll, which he has brought her from the Soho Bazaar); when Sir Lyster rushes in with an invitation to dinner at the Slades', and desires her to write an immediate acceptance for both of them. She is very loath to do so, for she guesses from the date that the party will be a large one; and has no hope that from such an assemblage the bride elect will be excluded. So she pleads everything that she can think of in favour of her being permitted to remain at home; but her husband is far more determined that she shall go.

"Why! it will be as good as an affront to refuse, without a valid reason for doing so. Don't you see that the invitation is dated a fortnight hence, only a week or two before the wedding; and the party has doubtless been arranged with a view of introducing Miss Cameron to their friends? Of course we must go! You seem to think very little of your position in society, Lady Gwynne; but I am not forgetful of

mine, nor of what I owe to such old friends as the Slades. People of our standing must consent at times to forego their private wishes in consideration of the public good."

Sir Lyster talks as though he were the Prince of Wales, or the Duke of Cambridge, or just a little bigger and more important than either of those gentlemen; and Lady Gwynne disputes the point no longer, but obeys his demand, and cherishes a huge contempt for his opinions. So she foregoes her private wishes for the public good, and is dragged to the big dinner party, feeling as though she were being led to execution, and only trusting that it will prove to be so large that the love-making she dreads to witness may be carried on without her cognisance. But she is not doomed to undergo that needless torture. The assembly is a very numerous one, and the son of the house is present, but the bride elect is nowhere to be seen. Lady Gwynne soon discovers the fact, and is grateful for it. She feels somehow as though her gratitude were due to Auberon for this relief—as though it must have been through his agency, strategic or straightforward, that so important a guest has been omitted from the list of invitations.

And she is right; Auberon Slade may be weak and wilful, even wicked, but his memory is not quite so defective, nor his heart so callous, as to permit him to parade his new courtship beneath the eyes of the woman to whom but a few short weeks before he had promised to be faithful until death. He performs the multifarious duties which, as eldest son of the house, fall to his share, with assiduity; dutifully paying court to all the old dowagers, to whom his mother directs his attention, and finally going down to dinner with twenty stone of widow, surmounted by a very red face and an undeniable wig, upon his arm. But he looks pale and worried, nevertheless; not near so brave and gallant as when he broke that news to her behind the curtains at the theatre; and Lady Gwynne is thankful, on taking her seat at the dinner-table, to find that he is divided from her by a string of guests, and a mountain of flowers, so that by no possibility can she catch even a glimpse of the features of his face. The temporary separation lessens her trial, which, even with the help of that alleviation, seems at times more than she can calmly bear. It is almost worse when dinner is concluded, and the ladies

are in the drawing-room, for then his mother and sisters cluster about her as the most important person there, and drive her nearly wild with descriptions of the impending ceremony, and assurances of the beauty, amiability, and grace of the future Mrs Auberon Slade.

"Oh! such a sweet creature, Lady Gwynne. I wish she had been here to-night, you would have been charmed with her, I am sure; and so devoted to my brother!"

"Such simplicity! such grace! such childlike innocence!" exclaims the mother-in-law expectant.

"Ah! you are talking of Miss Charlotte Cameron!"—this from a sympathetic guest. "She is, indeed, all that you say. Mr Powlett assured me yesterday that he had seldom met with a more amiable disposition."

"There is her *carte-de-visite*," interrupts the second sister, as she bears forward one of those museums of ugliness—photograph albums. "Now, Lady Gwynne shall see what she is like."

"Oh! but that doesn't do her justice."

"Well, no picture could do that!"

"No! dear Lottie's forte lies in her colour. She is as fresh as a rose."

"Yes! I heard Auberon call her his moss rosebud the other day. Rather a pretty simile, I thought, as her hair waves naturally."

"Oh! now, Emma! that is too bad of you, telling poor Auberon's secrets; what a shame! But I am sure Lady Gwynne will not let it go any further, for Auberon is so very particular; it would vex him terribly to have it known."

Amidst some such chorus as the above, she takes up the photograph, and looks at it, and for the first moment is disposed to agree with Mr Norris, that the original can possess neither beauty, nor talents, nor grace; for the picture is that of an ordinary-looking girl, with rather heavy features, and inclined to stoutness, sitting in a very inelegant attitude, and clad in a hideous plaid dress. But Miss Charlotte Cameron—like many a photographic victim—is not nearly so black as she is painted, for her chief glories, which consist in reddish gold hair and a very bright complexion, are worse than lost beneath the untender mercies of the sun. Lady Gwynne knows nothing of this, however, or is not in a position to

realise it, and can therefore only gaze silently at the representation before her, and wonder what Auberon can have found to charm him in the original. And the interpolatory remarks of Miss Cameron's intended sisters-in-law do not help her to a solution of the mystery.

"Dear Lottie! She looks a little sulky there, doesn't she, Lady Gwynne? But I am sure it is quite an error! she never sulks."

"Oh! I have seen Lottie look just like that when she is put out. I think it a very good likeness; and so does Auberon, for yesterday when Mrs Randall remarked that it was not flattering, he said it was as like as two peas, which I thought very strong."

"Well, but I don't think Lottie is sulky. Mamma, dear, do you consider Lottie at all sulky?"

"Oh no, my dear; but I should say she had a spirit of her own. She is a very fine character."

"Ah! well! all women should have some spirit, shouldn't they, Lady Gwynne? And it will do Auberon good sometimes, not to have his own way."

"Here is Auberon, so I shall tell him what you say, Emma."

"No! don't."

"Yes, I shall! Auberon!"

Lady Gwynne claps the pages of the album hastily together, and deposits it upon the nearest table. She would not have him see what she has been contemplating, nor hear what they have been discussing, for the world. She longs to get up, and move to another part of the drawing-room, but it is too late. Attracted by his sister's voice, he is already amongst them, looking as gloomy and dissatisfied as he was before.

"What is it, Margaret? Did you call me?"

"Yes; there is treason hatching here. I want to tell you what Emma has been saying about you and Lottie! She says"——

"No! don't, Margaret!"

"Be quiet, Emma! You shouldn't say such things if you don't wish to have them repeated. She says"——

But what she says, Auberon Slade is never destined to hear, for the cloud upon his brow changes to a frown, and he is already moving away from them.

"Can't you talk sense?" he exclaims, angrily. "Are there

no topics of interest with which to amuse your guests, than these abominable discussions upon home affairs? When will you learn that domestic details are engrossing to none but the parties concerned in them?"

And he walks off at once to the other end of the apartment.

The sisters, with bated breath and looks of awe, glance comically at one another.

"There, now, Margaret; you 've put him out."

"Well, it was all your fault, if I have."

"But you need not have repeated what I said of him. You know how he dislikes to be talked about."

"Ah! well! he will have forgotten it by to-morrow; and if not, we must get Lottie to coax him into good humour again."

And so on, and so on; until Lady Gwynne's carriage is announced, and she rises wearily to bid good night to her entertainers, and is thankful to find that the old gentleman considers it his especial duty to lead her downstairs, and start her safely on her journey home. How grateful she is to find herself once more there.

The slow torture she undergoes in these days of uncertainty and suspense, seems to be the worst which she has yet experienced.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A GREAT CHANGE.

She meets Auberon Slade on several occasions after this, for the dinner at his father's house is quickly followed by one given by themselves, at the hotel, at which Sir Lyster announces that he has taken a double box at Drury Lane Theatre for the next evening, that the whole party may enjoy the Christmas Pantomime together, and to her astonishment, Auberon pleads no previous engagement as an excuse for declining either invitation. That he should voluntarily choose to meet her, who would at any moment have turned miles out of her way to avoid encountering him, is a marvel to Lady Gwynne; and from it she can only draw the bitter inference that even the sight of her has ceased to give him pain. But that he does meet her, is all that can be said for him.

Auberon Slade continues to laugh and talk as much as he used to do, even more; but he never laughs or talks with Lady Gwynne. To her he addresses slow monosyllabic sentences, chiefly dictated by the exigencies of etiquette, during the delivery of which he keeps his eyes (so unchanged in their expression, when she is not regarding them) fixed upon her face, until, perhaps by chance, she raises her own, to find that he is looking indifferently in quite an opposite direction. The alteration in his voice and manner, as he turns to speak to some one else, fills her crushed, jealous heart with envy; it appears so light and gay, so full of interest; could she behold it when, striving to copy his assumed impassibility, lest he should guess the pain it causes her, she also laughs and talks with other men, Lady Gwynne would lose her fear that he has forgotten what she was to him. For then it is that his next neighbour is surprised to find that Auberon Slade has suddenly grown deaf and oblivious of her company, and sits, silent and abstracted, darting angry, moody glances on the male miscreant opposite to him, who dares to be powerful enough to call forth a smile upon the pale face of his hostess, or to make the old well-remembered dimples appear about the corners of her mouth. Then it is, may be, that Gwendoline Gwynne, led by that inexplicable sympathy which, from the first, has united her to Auberon Slade, knows by instinct that he is gazing at her; and looking up with a sudden quick glance of misery (uncontrollable, because undesigned), pierces his heart deeper than a thousand reproaches could do. And in those moments, few and far between, which come and go like summer lightning, their hearts once more speak to one another, and she knows that whatever has alienated him from her—prudence, conscience, or distrust—she is still dear to him, if only for the memory of what has been; and thanks God for the knowledge, even whilst she admits that it would be far better if he could lose remembrance of it all.

Sometimes during those painful hours of trying to solve a mystery which is insoluble, she feels as though she could no longer endure the misery of suspense; and must go up to him, and boldly take his hand, and say, "Auberon! what has divided us? only tell me, in order that I may help, instead of hinder you, upon the path that duty has doubtless incited you to take." And had he formed no fresh engagement, made no

pretence of a new love, she would assuredly, by her honesty, have been led to demand an explanation of him. But with every thought of it, with every conviction that, considering the circumstances under which they parted, it would be not only excusable but the right thing to do, comes the remembrance of Charlotte Cameron, of the ordinary-looking, second-rate, inanimate being for whose affection he has seen fit to barter hers—and pride keeps her back from speaking to him. Shall she let him imagine that she still wears the willow, which he plucked (withered) from his brow, before it had rested there a month? No! she cannot; she *will not!* When she imagined that his heart was all her own, pride died in her breast, but a hydra-headed monster has been nurtured there upon the knowledge that he *can* take another to his arms. Auberon!—*her* Auberon!—the husband of another woman! Merciful powers! take her life before the day arrives on which the act is to be accomplished. And there is so little time—so little, little time!

Little time! Yes! could he not have waited? If his heart is so cold, his love so poor and weak, his impatience to forget so strong, might he not at least have reached the goal of his desires without trampling over the still writhing carcase of her fallen hope; of crushing utterly her feeble ray of happiness? Was it necessary for him to rush into marriage with a lie in his right hand? as false to the woman he is about to wed, as to the one whom he has deserted! But here she remembers that she sent him from her; that she drove him forth as he had prophesied she would, comfortless and alone; alike bereft of love and hope, left to himself and the first distraction that might happen to lie in his path. And did she not resign him to his God; place his dear love, as well as his dear self, an offering upon the altar of their mutual Lord? And dare she regret what she has done; grudge her devotion; consider the sacrifice too great; or thinks she retains any claim to influence or order the actions of his future life? She knows that she does not, that she *dares* not; and with the softer, better mood, the woman's real feelings gain the upper hand, and tears fall gently on her lap in pity for—not in condemnation of—the man who will ever hold the first place in her heart. So that the explanation never comes, although a desire for it continues very strong; and Lady Gwynne associates with Auberon Slade as

if she knew no more of him than of his sisters; and, with his aid, unasked, but given, has battled successfully hitherto (notwithstanding Sir Lyster's vigorous efforts to bring about an opposite result) against the danger and the dread, which she cannot overcome, of encountering Miss Charlotte Cameron. If at this period my story seems to repeat itself, and run the risk of wearying its readers by dwelling too often and too long upon the thoughts and feelings of my heroine, it is because her mind has become a constant repetition of questions that are never answered, but fall back from the voiceless air upon her heart, to gnaw it night and day, and leave it always unsatisfied and restless. She cannot arrive at a decision concerning Auberon Slade; his acquaintance find no difficulty in giving a name to his behaviour, but her love will not permit her to do so. In her mind, which revels in torturing itself, he is "everything by turns, and nothing long." One hour she feels sure that he is acting prudently, the next, that he has cruelly deceived her; in the morning believes she is still loved, by nightfall is certain he has quite forgotten. The evening may find her resting contentedly in the belief that God has ordered all for the best, whilst noon will see her on her knees in a paroxysm of despair, vainly demanding why such things are. She is very meek and gentle at this time with her husband, for she is subdued by all that she has gone through, and anxious in some measure to atone to him for the unpremeditated infidelity into which each hour betrays her. But on one point she is very firm, and unfortunately it is a point which is considered by Sir Lyster an important one—she obstinately refuses to accept the invitation which has been sent her, to appear at the wedding of Auberon Slade and Charlotte Cameron. Not at the instigation of the bridegroom elect, of that she is well aware; it has issued straight from the hand of his mother and sisters; but whoever may desire her presence, she refuses to accede to the request. She has suffered sufficiently (so she tells herself), without the endurance of this last agony, which is no part of the sacrifice that Heaven has marked out for her.

Sir Lyster is more than vexed at his wife's refusal, he is excessively angry; for he attributes her firmness entirely to caprice, or a malicious desire to annoy him through the medium of his friends. She has plenty of time and dresses

and money! what the devil should prevent her from devoting a single morning to gracing the wedding-breakfast of the Slades? For that Lady Gwynne does grace any scene in which she chooses to appear, Sir Lyster is not quite such a fool, nor so tired of her, as to attempt to deny. But he has conceived a violent admiration for Miss Charlotte Cameron, and not only desires that his wife should pay her the compliment of appearing interested in her marriage ceremony, but make her a suitable present, in both their names, on the occasion. Something handsome, and worthy of the donors, he says ostentatiously (it is long since he has presented anything "handsome" to either Daisy or her mother), a bracelet, or set of brooch and earrings—emeralds will suit Miss Cameron's complexion better than any other stones—and Lady Gwynne had better go to Hunt and Roskell's, and choose it herself. But Lady Gwynne utterly refuses to do so. Miss Cameron, from all accounts, has plenty of rich friends to make her presents, and she does not consider that either she or the Slades have any claim upon them.

"If you are determined to give her something, Lyster, and Auberon Slade will permit his wife to accept a gift from you, you must do it on your own account. I decline to have anything to do with the matter."

"Damn it, madam! do you suppose I shall allow you to fly in my face in this manner?"

"You cannot force me to break through the rules of society, because you have taken a fancy to a pretty face! Nor to appear at a ceremony for which I have no taste. I hate weddings and wedding breakfasts, and everything connected with them."

"So do I—in retrospection."

"You know that I am not usually disobedient to you, Lyster. But in this case I must be firm. My presence or absence can make no difference to the breakfast-party, nor to your appearance at it; and as for the present, I am sure that no one would be more astonished than Miss Cameron herself, at receiving a bracelet from a person to whom she is utterly unknown!"

"Very well! very well! have your own way! You'll repent of it before the day is out—that's all I can tell you."

"If I do, it will not be my fault! I cannot act differently!"

"*I* shall be at the wedding anyway—I suppose you have no objection to that?"

"O Lyster! how could I have? I am sure that your presence will quite atone for my absence. You are a much more important personage than I am. And they all know that poor Daisy is laid upon her back," she answers, with alacrity, thankful to think she has got over her difficulty with so much ease.

"Very well! That will be the day after to-morrow, and we shall go back to Felton the same afternoon."

"The same afternoon?" she falters.

She has imagined they are to remain in London for a month longer at the very least; for although Dr Aberystwith has pronounced his opinion concerning Daisy's spine, the child is still under his care, and rigidly pursuing the treatment he recommends; and Lady Gwynne knows that she will lose considerably by being sent back so soon to Dr Stewart and the country.

"The same afternoon, Lyster! How can we? Dr Aberystwith said only yesterday that Daisy must continue the chemical baths for at least three weeks longer, before he will be able to judge what effect they are likely to produce, or to decide upon any plan for her future treatment."

"That's nothing to me," returns Sir Lyster, as though his wife had been talking of the ailments of a favourite dog. "I'm sick of town, and I don't intend to remain in it an hour after Slade has gone. I want to find myself back at Felton, and where I am you must be. You packed up your traps in less than two days to come here, so you will have no difficulty in being ready at the proper time. Now, don't forget! we go home by the four o'clock train on Thursday."

"But, Lyster, do consider the child! I wouldn't care for myself (you know I would not). I had no desire to visit London, and I shall be very glad to leave it again; but for Daisy's sake—it is so very important. Dr Aberystwith says that the comfort of her whole life may depend upon the strictness with which we carry out the treatment of the first few months!"

She might as well appeal to the table or the chair or any other of the inanimate articles by which she is surrounded; for she has balked and thwarted Sir Lyster, and he will carry

out his noble revenge. She has refused to put on that fawn-coloured silk and Brussels-lace bonnet which he knows she has amongst her stock of clothing, and, replete with smiles of congratulation, appear at Auberon Slade's wedding, to wish him as much joy in his married life as she has found in hers; and when an English moral slave refuses to obey, she must be taught that there is such a thing as a bowstring for the inclination, and a bastinado for the heart. And should that heart be bound up in the welfare of another, and a still more defenceless nature than her own, what better means to make it wince, than when the blow falls second-hand?

"I don't care a hang for old Aberystwith or any other confounded humbug! The child is mine, and I choose that she shall return to Felton; and there 's no law in England to prevent a father doing as he wills with his own."

"I know there is not," she replies, sadly; "for the laws of this world are wofully defective in the narrow margin that they leave for possibilities; but there is a law of God, Lyster (the God who regards both you and me at this present moment, and judges between us), that is capable of outwitting all the laws of England, if He will it so."

He makes no answer to her speech, except by setting a couple of chairs before her, and after apologising for the rudeness of her pulpit and the paucity of her congregation, requesting that she will at once continue the sermon she has so successfully commenced.

"I am not an advocate for week-day services, as you are perhaps aware," he goes on, maliciously; "but on this occasion, and in consideration of the intense interest I take in your subject, I waive my natural objections."

His irony silences her.

"I can say no more, Lyster. I suppose it must be as you desire. If you will not postpone our departure for Daisy's sake, I know you will not do it for mine."

The sound of tears is in her lowered voice, but it does not soften him.

"Oh! you have come to your senses, have you—very well! then—we understand each other! Thursday—at four o'clock! And if old Aberystwith makes any demur upon the subject, you may tell him, with my compliments, to go to the devil."

Saying which, Sir Lyster Gwynne leaves the apartment

without another glance at his insulted wife. She cannot cry; she almost wishes that she could, but her tears seem dried up in their sources, and suffering now only makes her brow beat, and sighs well up thickly from her bosom. And she has still Daisy to think for, and to prepare for the coming change; and whilst there is another dependent on herself for comfort or support, Lady Gwynne (as Mr Laurence told her) will neither faint nor fail. The wedding-day arrives, a gloomy, lowering day in February, with unborn snow in the leaden-coloured sky, and a bitter north wind sweeping round the corners of the streets; a most unfavourable day (so Dr Aberystwith says) to move his patient to the country. Yet Sir Lyster's decree remains unchanged, and the bill is paid and the boxes packed, and every preparation made for their departure; and Lady Gwynne sits in the cheerless drawing-room, watching for her husband's entrance, and wondering if he can have forgotten at what hour he ordered them to be ready to start. He quitted the hotel before eleven, and it is past three, and he has not returned. Surely the wedding breakfast cannot be prolonged till now! The hours have passed but wearily to Lady Gwynne, as may be well imagined; but for her child's sake, she has born up bravely against what she knows to be inevitable, and marvellously evinced the possession of that patience for which she has so often prayed. And now it must be over, and the die of Auberon Slade's destiny irrevocably cast. Henceforward he can be nothing to her, excepting in her prayers. She sits quietly amongst the travelling cases and bundles of wraps and umbrellas, vainly striving to pierce the future of his fate and hers, yet interrupting the little heartbroken petitions for his happiness, that rise continuously from her labouring breast, to give a freshly-thought-of order, or impress an old direction, so that no one guesses, from the calmness with which she goes through her duty, that with every moment numbered by the clock, hope recedes further from her, and desolation becomes more sure.

Yet so are half the tragedies of this deceptive world played out.

"Mamma, darling! it is four o'clock; how can we go to Felton to-day? And I am so tired, do put me back to bed."

The childish complaint rouses Lady Gwynne from her

reverie more effectually than anything else could have done, and she starts to find that Daisy's information is indeed correct, and the time fixed for their departure past. How is she to act; what next to do? There is no other train to Felton until ten at night, and surely Sir Lyster will never dream of exposing the little invalid at such an hour. Besides, the child is already fretful, and wearied out with the protracted waiting, and upon further consideration the mother determines to brave everything, even her husband's anger, sooner than entail a longer trial on her weakened frame. So Daisy is put back to bed, as she desires, and made happy with the assurance that she may lie there, without any fear of being disturbed again, until the following day; whilst Lady Gwynne, after laying aside her bonnet and shawl, returns to the sitting-room to resume the watch that has been interrupted by the attendance on her child. She is just a little nervous now of encountering Sir Lyster; for she knows how violent and unreasonable he can be, and is not sure whether he will excuse her conduct in having waited for his return, nor say that she should have proceeded to Felton without him. But she has acted as she believed he desired her to do; and tries to hope that, this time at least, he will say she has been right. Yet she changes colour with every step that sounds upon the stairs, and heaves a sigh of relief as it passes her apartment, and five, six, seven o'clock come and go, and Sir Lyster is still absent. Then she is really frightened—not that he has come to any harm (it is only hearts that love that fret themselves to death with such sweet, needless worries), but that finding himself late, he has gone straight to the railway station (assuming he will meet her there), and thence to Felton; and will break all the vials of his wrath on her devoted head when next they meet. She thinks of sending some one to the Slades' to ask if he has left the house, and at what time, and rings the bell with that intention; but when it is responded to, something in the servant's manner tells her that news has been received.

"Is Sir Lyster home?" she demands, eagerly.

"No, my lady; but—but—Mr Slade (the old gentleman, my lady) would be glad to speak with you for a few minutes."

"Show him up at once," she answers, and stands upon her feet until the old man's tardy steps have reached the door.

"What is it, Mr Slade? Please tell me at once—I cannot bear suspense."

The solemn expression of his face has already informed her that bad news (or what the world will call "bad" news) is coming, and her words are uttered in a tone of so much excitement, that Mr Slade considers it necessary to use a double amount of caution and prosiness in breaking the intelligence he has brought her.

"My dear Lady Gwynne," he commences, slowly, "I am indeed grieved to be the bearer of sad news to you; but I trust that you will call all your powers of fortitude to bear upon"——

She turns, if anything, paler than she has turned before, and grasps the back of the chair by which she stands.

"Mr Slade! I conjure you in God's name to be brief. Is it—is it my husband—or—or—any one else?"

"I regret to say it is indeed Sir Lyster of whom I come to speak to you. He"——

"Is he only injured, or—or—*dead?*"

Mr Slade bows his head—

"*Dead*—dead! How? When?"

"Oh! my dear lady! be strong—be strong!"

"I *am* strong! When did it happen?"

"Immediately after our young couple left us for their tour."

"And how?"

"Very suddenly! It was an awful shock to us as you may imagine—we had the best attendance at once upon the spot. I believe the doctors consider it was apoplexy."

. . . . . .

There is complete silence in the gloomy room; the old man, with his eyes cast upon the ground, stands by the table; the woman still grasps the back of the friendly chair.

"Lady Gwynne! for the sake of your child; of those still left; I pray you"——

"Mr Slade! will you do me one great kindness? Leave me to myself."

. . . . . .

So he leaves her, to try and realise her great deliverance and her great despair.

CHAPTER XXV.

WIDOWHOOD.

HER *great deliverance!* I wonder if the expression will strike harshly on the ear of any one who may read these pages! Did they, instead of recording a real life, as Nature made and God transformed it, treat of the sorrows of a mere conventional heroine, they might tell how the announcement of her husband's sudden death is followed, on the part of Lady Gwynne, by a burst of violent sorrow for his loss, and lamentation for her past behaviour to him. But it is not the case: why, it would be impossible to say, unless, indeed, because it is not natural, and Gwendoline Gwynne is essentially so. She has sinned against Heaven and against earth; she has followed the leading of her own impulses, and bitterly repented the fatal issue into which they so nearly betrayed her—she is quite aware of that. But—she has lived the joyless, cheerless life of a prisoner in captivity, linked to a man without love, or sympathy, or consideration; and God has seen fit to break her bonds, and she has too much honesty to delude herself into the belief that she is not thankful. To say that the news of so sudden a deliverance is not a shock to her, would be to write her down unwomanly and unchristian; for the mere knowledge that her husband has been called away without a moment for repentance is sufficient to appal her. Oh, how awful it is to think over his last words, his last acts, and to remember that he has passed into the hands of Judgment! Her first thought upon receiving the intelligence is a thanksgiving, that through all her troubles she has never been tempted to wish for his decease; her first impulse, a great desire to fall upon her knees and intercede with God for mercy on his soul. And so, as soon as Mr Slade has left her side, she does; and offers up her prayer, not only for the dead, but for herself, that, left to her own guidance, she may be enabled to lead a better and a holier life, and rear her child to do the same. And if with this petition there comes another, mingled with far bitterer tears, that plead for resigna-

tion to the Will that has permitted her to miss, as it were by a hair's breadth, the happiness for which she was willing to give up so much, who shall blame her? Not you, madam! who cover your skirts with crape, and use envelopes bordered an inch deep in woe, for a husband whom you worried to the grave; nor you, who, still residing beneath the protection of yours, and turning up your nose in virtuous indignation at the poor painted wretches who pass you in the streets, yet keep your assignations, and your generous friends, and your mysterious presents, wherewith to mystify your more innocent or ignorant acquaintance!

The world is a great universal humbug, that outwits itself, and makes it easy to guess who deserves the greatest censure, by her who passes it the most readily. The shock to Lady Gwynne is an undoubted fact, for no woman ever less expected to be left a widow than herself. Sir Lyster! so strong, so hale, so hearty! with his florid complexion, stalwart arm, loud voice, and capabilities of appetite—whoever would have dreamt that he would have been cut off, without a moment's warning, like an infant of an hour old? His wife has overlooked the thick coarse throat, plethoric temperament, and unrestrained desires, which might have warned a more experienced eye that when the citadel gave in, it would be suddenly. And some such suspicion may have struck the man himself, which would account for his unreasonable dislike to everything that was connected with illness or its cure, and intolerant of the least exhibition of weakness in another. Well! it is over—and the fears, the foibles, and the sins of Lyster Gwynne will alike be buried with him in the grave! She learns many more particulars of his behaviour on that last day afterwards; how he was the heartiest and the jolliest at the wedding breakfast, giving the health of the bride and the bridegroom in a speech which excited the laughter and the admiration of all present, and been amongst the foremost to throw satin slippers after the carriage in which they drove away. How, on re-entering the house, he expressed a wish for a cigar, and accompanied Mr Slade and some of his guests to a room which they had set apart for smoking, where, by his anecdotes and *bon-mots*, he had kept the whole company in a roar, and not risen to return to his hotel until the clock had long struck five. And finally —how, whilst even in the act of reaching for his hat and great

coat in the hall, he had staggered forward, and then back, and finally fallen prostrate on the floor, where life was pronounced to be extinct, even though five minutes did not elapse between his seizure and the arrival of professional assistance. She listens to these details calmly, so calmly, indeed, that old Mrs Slade prophesies that when Lady Gwynne does give way, the reaction will be terrible—little dreaming, good old soul, that throughout her prosy and oft-repeated narrative, her passive listener has been trying to unravel, not the reason why God has taken the dead man from her, but that old mystery which tortured her brain before, and has returned with tenfold force upon it now—why He ever permitted her to meet Auberon Slade, or, so permitting, turned the current of events out of their natural course, in order to make life still more perplexing to her than it was before! She leaves her child in London, under the care of Dr Aberystwith and an able nurse, and accompanies her husband's body down to Felton Hall, and watches by it faithfully, until the last offices of friendship and religion are performed, and it is consigned to the mausoleum of his forefathers. And then, for the first time, Lady Gwynne seems to have leisure to pause, and plan the purpose of her future life. She cannot live at Felton, nor indeed anywhere in the same degree of luxury that she has done hitherto. As Sir Lyster leaves no male heir in the direct line, the Hall, together with the Welsh estates, and certain property in other parts of England, go, with the title, to his cousin, Captain, now Sir Richard Gwynne, who has spent all his life in India, and scarcely knows the old place by sight. The late baronet has made all the provision that he can for his wife and daughter, by settling private property to the amount of eight hundred a-year upon the former, and an old country place called "The Orchard House," situated in the village of Warmouth, Dorsetshire, and producing a rental of some eighty pounds a-year, upon the latter; a very sorry pittance, so Mr Laurence considers it; but the widow is of a totally different opinion.

"Eight hundred and eighty a-year, Mr Laurence, and only for Daisy and myself. Oh, I think it is ample. I shall take a snug little house somewhere in Kensington or Brompton, and keep a couple of servants, and we shall be as happy as the day is long."

"Live in London! Is that really your intention?"

His thoughts are expressed in his face, and Lady Gwynne guesses them, and blushes like a rose. He is thinking that she ought not to take up her residence in the same place as Auberon Slade.

"Why not? Where would you have me go to?"

But she puts the question in a subdued voice, and very much with the manner of a child that knows beforehand what the answer it receives will be.

"Not to London, decidedly. The sea-side would be twice as advantageous to Daisy."

"But Dr Aberystwith! She is under his care."

"She will not be so always. However, ask his advice upon the subject. I am quite sure he will agree with me, that for a weakly child the country or sea air is preferable to that of town."

There is silence between them for a few moments, which he breaks with the sudden query—

"Why not reside at the Orchard House itself?"

"The Orchard House? Why, I thought it was a rickety, tumble-down old place, not fit for any one?"

"How do you expect to get eighty pounds a year for it, if it is in that condition?" he rejoins, laughing. "I know the last time I saw it I thought it a most charming retreat."

"Do you know Warmouth, then?"

"I know Barnes, the curate there, very well, and I believe it is a place that would suit you in every respect. Major and Mrs Ferrars had the Orchard House when I passed through there last summer, but I believe it was only for a short term, or their lease was nearly expired, for I remember Barnes lamenting over their probable departure. He would be charmed to get you for a parishioner."

But she is still unwilling to entertain the thought; it seems such a long distance to put between herself and all her friends —such an unnecessary aggravation of her lonely and desolate condition.

"But is it not rather enervating?" she suggests next.

"I think not. Warmouth is mild, like all the Dorsetshire coast; but the Orchard House stands on a hill, and overlooks the village. And then it is by the sea, which I should consider a great thing for Daisy."

"But her education?"

"There are towns close at hand from which you could get masters. And under any circumstances now, her studies must be conducted at home."

"Eight hundred will certainly go further in the country than it would in London," she answers, thoughtfully.

"Dear Lady Gwynne! it is not a question of money, it is one of expediency—nay, more, of right. I daresay you think, now circumstances are so altered, that, come what may, you are perfectly secure; but you are very much mistaken. 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked;' never more so than when, under the guise of security, it lures us on to our destruction."

"O Mr Laurence! you do not think—you cannot imagine"——

"I think nothing of you, dear friend, but what is perfectly good, and true, and pure. So much so, that I do not believe you will even put yourself in the way of temptation when it is once pointed out to you. And that is why, in urging you to take up your residence at the Orchard House, or some other country place, I feel confident that eventually you will follow my advice."

"But if I am not to live in town," she answers, unconsciously assenting to his words, "I should so much have liked to be near you."

"And I should have had the greatest pleasure in feeling you were my neighbour, Lady Gwynne; but I do not counsel it, for two reasons. One is, that you would not find it pleasant to occupy a secondary position where you have held the first; and the other, that this place, and the associations linked to it, are not good for you. You had much better seek new scenes and new faces, and leave the past to bury itself."

"Your medicine is always so bitter," she says, with a melancholy smile.

"But it cures, my child, it cures. I believe you are the better for it, even now."

"I feel the safer," she whispers, with her hand in his; and from that hour makes up her mind that if all things agree to render the plan feasible, she will become the mistress in reality, as well as name, of the Orchard House.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE ORCHARD HOUSE.

BUILT of grey stone in the fashion of a century ago, and backed by timber that was planted at the time that it was built, the Orchard House looks proudly down from the summit of the hill on which it stands, upon the more modern edifices of Warmouth. It is a charming, old-fashioned place, though not very large, with Gothic windows, and a heavy, iron-bound door; and the kitchen and flower-gardens by which it is surrounded are enclosed by a high wall, which gives it the appearance of a nunnery. Indeed, it is generally supposed in Warmouth that the Orchard House was once dedicated to conventual purposes; for a tiny chapel, now the exclusive property of Mr Barnes, and the orthodox services of which (to the extreme disgust of the vicar) have emptied the principal pews in the parish church, stands almost within its grounds, and is embowered by trees and shrubs that formed a part of the convent garden. A large orchard, as its modern name implies, lies at the side of the house, whilst the green hill in front slopes down to a peaceful valley, spread over by rich fields; beyond which the eye rests upon the village of Warmouth, and the rough dancing waves, divided from it only by the green cliffs and shelving rocky beach.

Lady Gwynne, in virtue of her resolution, goes down to see this place, and though the season is unfavourable, and the trees are bare, falls in love with it at once. There is an air of peace and quiet pervading the old Orchard House that appeals very powerfully to her aching heart, weary of hoping and longing, and being disappointed, and makes her feel as though, once settled here with Daisy, she might even outgrow her present trouble, and learn to lead a simple and comfortable life. She delights in the appearance of the low-roofed, wainscoated apartments; the quaintly designed bed-rooms that lead into each other by little flights of steps; the prim, old-fashioned parlours; the straight, narrow paths of the flower-garden; and the old trees and standard bushes, that

have bloomed and blossomed there for years. The house is empty, for the last tenants only held it for a year, and it is supposed to be furnished, although the dull, sober-coloured carpets and curtains, and the uncomfortable looking beds and chairs, cause Lady Gwynne alternately to sudder and to smile. But all that will soon be rectified, for she has some few possessions of her own, and her income, moderate though it may be, is sufficient to supply her and her child with all the necessaries of life. So that she makes light of every obstacle, and goes through the rooms, and grounds, and stables, with such a cheerful countenance, and springing step, that the old gardener and his wife, who have been left in charge, and have been somewhat awed in prospect of a visit of inspection from the owner of the property, agree in the conclusion, that she is the "bonniest widow as ever they clapped eyes on, and no more notion of sorrow in her face than if she were a baby." Ah, simple hearts! that have never known worse care themselves than what has been occasioned by a scarcity of bread or fuel, or a parting with Joe and Nancy on their first desertion of the home nest, to go to service or to sea; what would they think, could they be made to understand the tempests that have racked this woman's soul! Can it be, that education and refinement, and the march of intellect, instead of rendering us stronger, make us less capable of bearing our griefs well; or do nerves and frame keep pace together, and have the rough skin and the rough mind no capability of suffering in measure with ourselves? For it is undoubtedly true that, with the exception of a very few cases, the labouring poor do not suffer the mental anguish that we do; they make a great noise over trouble when it comes, but they have neither the faculty of bearing it silently nor long. Could the old gardener and his wife alluded to, be told that this lady, who looks so young to them, whose buoyant step they follow with admiration, and whose eye they see brighten as it lights upon each fresh evidence that her future home will be a pleasant one, carries a broken heart beneath her temporary smiles, they would not believe it! What she, who, notwithstanding her deep mourning garb and melancholy-looking widow's cap, speaks so pleasantly and in such a gentle voice; who even stops to notice the old purblind, useless watch-dog, and assures them it shall remain a pensioner upon the bounty

of the Orchard House; who seems to take so keen an interest in all the news of Warmouth they garrulously communicate to her; and best of all the rest, has promised to retain their services about the garden! She, the pretty creature, with a broken heart! (whatever that may be); "faith! and she looks more ready for another bridegroom; and it 's what they 'll hope to see her with, before they die, into the bargain; bless her sweet eyes!" Silly old man and woman! prating of things you do not understand. Could the dark cushions of the railway carriage, in which she travels back to London, lonely and desolate, tell tales, they would record the history of a storm of tears that wetted through their thick material, and sighs that burst reluctant from her labouring bosom, as devils cast out by the finger of their Lord. To be planning a new life, and arranging a new home, without any thought of, any reference to *him*, except the miserable purpose of placing a barrier for ever between their future intercourse, is agony to Lady Gwynne; but an agony which her religion and her pride will overcome. For though she bears no enmity to Auberon Slade—though long ago she has forgiven him the slight he has cast upon her love, and even persuaded herself, that in acting as he has done, he has acted for the best—there is no pleasure to her in the thought of him, or mention of his name, and she believes there never can be so again. She has but one fierce longing left predominant in her, the desire to *forget!* Oh! if she could but forget; forget he ever met her, ever loved her, ever told her that he loved, so that she might reconcile his behaviour with honour, consistency, and truth; and whatever her own pain, rest on the assurance of his present happiness with comfort. But that is impracticable to her, as it is impracticable to all who sink their hopes upon a bankrupt faith! Many may court, but it is few who win oblivion. Yet shall her memory bring her more peace than his forgetfulness to him! The opinion of Dr Aberystwith coinciding with that of Mr Laurence, Lady Gwynne finally determines to take up her residence at Warmouth, and the natives are delighted at the prospect. For though the Orchard House has always been considered a species of dower-house of the family of Gwynne, and under that supposition been religiously bequeathed from widow to widow, or to spinster daughter, the owners have never seen fit

to occupy the place within the memory of man, and the advent of a real Lady Gwynne to take up her permanent abode amongst them is an event of no small importance to the inhabitants of Warmouth. Speculations as to the number of servants, and horses and carriages, the baronet's widow will keep, run high amongst them ; and the youthful part of the population indulge their wayward fancies with visions of dinner and dancing parties, to be given at the Orchard House, and young men visitors riveted to the spot for ever by the attraction of their charms. Great, therefore, is the universal disappointment when the modest possessions of Lady Gwynne pass through the village ; and the announcement is made public, through the agency of Mr Barnes, that their new neighbour is little better than a nurse to her invalid child, and does not intend either to receive or visit in the sense they expected her to do. It is true that the reports of the few who venture to leave their cards at the Orchard House, are all in favour of the young widow's looks and courteous demeanour, and that those who meet her accidentally upon the beach, or in the village, are rapturous in praise of the pensive beauty of her expression, or her tender smile ; but the fact only renders the herd more eager to gain admittance to her society, whilst each day convinces them that the ambition is hopeless ; Lady Gwynne seems determined to live for no one but her child.

Meanwhile (and quite unconscious of the comments her reticent behaviour is exciting), she feels more cheerful than she expected to do, for it is such a novel interest to be getting her house in order, and making every arrangement possible for Daisy's comfort. She has brought a governess with her from London, a young cheerful woman with a sunny disposition, who will not press the little invalid's brain too hard, nor be absent from her side when her mother is compelled to be away. So that Lady Gwynne is at liberty to superintend the disposition of her household treasures or the planning of her summer garden without feeling anxious on her little girl's account ; and the bustle and consequent exertion bring a faint colour back into her faded cheeks, and do her good. April is now close at hand, and in the pleasure of tending the spring flowers that appear in every direction, of cherishing sundry broods of ducks and chickens, and investing in a low chaise and charm-

ing dapple-grey pony, Lady Gwynne is quite oblivious of the fact that she is not acquainted with half the people in Warmouth, and finds an occasional visit from Mr Barnes, or some of the principal county families, quite sufficient society for her contentment. The climate is much milder in Warmouth than it used to be at Felton, and Daisy is already able to get out of doors in a reclining carriage drawn by the same fat donkey who brings up the salt water each morning for her bath, and seems to grow stronger every day from the exercise and change of air. And then Lady Gwynne is delighted to find that Mr Barnes loves to see flowers on the altar of his little sanctuary, and entrusts its daily decoration to her hands, so that the greenhouses acquire a fresh interest in her eyes, and she immediately devotes a large bed in the kitchen garden to the exclusive cultivation of "immortelles." And Sir Richard Gwynne (who appears to be a most kind-hearted and considerate young man, and desirous that the widow shall strip her late husband's property of half its belongings, if it pleases her), sends her down all the pictures, and the *objets d'art* from her own sitting-room (the very room, as she recalls with a quick shudder, which Auberon used to occupy whilst on his visit there), and a couple of graceful, silky, bright-eyed setters of the glorious Felton breed (for which she has expressed a fugitive desire), so that she is surrounded by objects of interest, and feels already as though she were once more *at home*. And Emily Musgrave (who, notwithstanding the airs and graces she plays off upon the other sex, is a very natural, warm-hearted girl when with her own) comes down to stay with her, and they drive about the country, and explore the villages together, and form intimate acquaintance with all the needy paupers within a circuit of five miles, by which means Lady Gwynne soon discovers that where the appetites are so good, and the family so large, there will not be much trouble in deciding what to do with the overplus of an income of eight hundred pounds a-year! So then she is peaceful—contented—satisfied—with the care of a small country house, the services of three maid-servants, and the companionship of an ailing child, a governess, and occasionally of a stray friend! She would not have this new life altered, if she could, nor exchanged for the old troubles, fast receding in the background! So she writes to Mr Laurence! Does it

then follow that Lady Gwynne is happy—that she has forgotten?—God of heaven! answer for her!

Since the day on which that double tragedy was enacted—Sir Lyster's sudden death, and (to her) the far more appalling circumstance of Auberon Slade's marriage—she has never heard, nor striven to hear, one word of news of him or his bride. At the one ceremonious visit of condolence paid her by the Slades, both parties were too well-bred to introduce any subject so opposite to the purpose for which they had met as the mention of a wedding—so that a decent silence had been rigidly maintained between them on that topic, and all she knows about him with certainty is, that he is lost to her, and it is her interest, as well as duty, to steel her heart against all influences but such as are connected with the present. She tries to think of Auberon Slade now as of one who loved her, but who died before Heaven granted her the opportunity to reward his love. She *cannot* think of him as the husband of Charlotte Cameron; it is too impossible, too strange to her, to reconcile the present with the past. To try and fancy him, who seemed so earnest, so devoted, so despairing in her cause, calmly subsided into the nothingness of domestic life, is to call up a picture of weakness and frailty and untruth, which her true faith forbids that she should couple with the thought of him who still reigns paramount in her deserted breast. So let her put the thought away, and never think of him, except it be when she kneels down alone, to pray that God may bless—

> "——Thy lamp to oil, thy cup to wine,
> Thy hearth to joy, thy hand to an equal touch
> Of loyal troth"——

Yet, even whilst she prays—hoping, Heaven witnesses, that her prayer may be accepted—she knows, that for the fickle and the untrue, prosperity and joy will never come; for he who has no strength to bear, has no strength to endure; and without patience and without endurance, life's blossoms drop, one by one, withered from our hands. Yet she prays—she would not think her prayers were uttered, unless *his* name were blended with them. She would repeat it, she *has* repeated it, when too wearied by the day's toil, or pleasures, or distresses, to pray for herself; and even culls some joy from the simple belief that if her earnest and continual

petitions cannot ward trouble from his door, they will, at least, enable him to bear it better. But that she shall ever meet him again, associate with him, know him as a friend, Gwendoline Gwynne does not believe possible, neither does she desire it. He has destroyed all prospect of pleasure in their future intercourse; for to see and watch him in the various phases of his domestic life, could only prove deep pain to her, and impose a forced and unnatural restraint which she does not feel strong enough to undergo. So she thinks of him, as we value the memory of one whom we have known in years long past, and look forward to encountering in Heaven; but she never permits herself to dwell upon the memory of all that he has been to her, nor to believe that they can ever meet except as mere acquaintances. And if a lurking devil in her heart brings back at times, against her better will, the remembrance of hot words and burning kisses, and passionate, soul-thrilling looks, she rushes to her farmyard or her garden, takes up a hoe, or feeds the ducks and chickens at wrong times, or calls off the setters from their midday meal, to scamper down the hill, and through the village, or anywhere that leads in a contrary direction to her own mad thoughts. And the people wonder to see her walk so fast, and whisper to each other that Lady Gwynne cannot be so delicate as she appears to be and the doctor loves to make her out; whilst she pelts by their cottages, unheeding of their censures, and does not return until she has exhausted her slight stock of strength, and is unfit for anything but to lie down upon the sofa for the rest of the evening, and be made much of by Emily Musgrave and Miss Ward.

CHAPTER XXVII.

RUN TO EARTH.

"Lo! the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time for the singing of birds is come"—to speak in more modern, but less poetical, language, summer has arrived, and Lady Gwynne, with her black dress looped far above the ground, a broad-brimmed hat upon

her head, and a huge pair of gardening gloves upon her dainty hands, is energetically helping old Reuben, the gardener, to weed the flower-beds. She does not play at work, this delicate-looking creature, with her fair, faintly-coloured face, and blue veined fingers; but goes at it with a will, stooping over the flowers as though she had been used to stooping all her life, and filling her wooden "trug" (which a rough country lad is waiting to empty as soon as filled) in half the time that her stiff-backed old retainer takes to complete the same task. On the lawn in front of the house, which, though small, can boast of two or three shady trees, lies Daisy in her invalid carriage, which can be transformed into a garden chair at will; it is the hour before their early dinner, a time always given up to Miss Ward for her own devices; but the child, though helpless and alone, looks perfectly content, as she alternately watches her mother's graceful movements, listens to old Reuben's fragmentary gossip or returns to the enjoyment of her latest story book.

"Now, Reuben! we really must not talk so much," cries Lady Gwynne, who occasionally finds it very needful to check the loquacity of her companion; "you say yourself that these beds must be finished to-day, and I am sure I should be quite ashamed if any one were to come in, and catch us in such a condition—they 're quite disgraceful."

Reuben removes his hat, scratches his head, and regards the weed-grown parterre thoughtfully.

"Well, to be sure, they have got a bit ahead of us, my lady; but then, you see, there was such a mort to be done with the kitchen stuff last week, and two pair of hands is but two pair of hands after all, my lady, be they?"

"Not a bit of it, Reuben," is the cheerful answer; "two such hands as yours and mine are equal to a dozen ordinary ones. But we talk to much, Reuben! it 's a fact, though a melancholy one! But now, if you 'll make a resolution to finish your flower-bed before the first dinner-bell rings, I 'll do the same by mine. What time is it, Daisy?"

"Half-past twelve, mamma."

"Oh! come! that 's famous, we have a whole hour before us. The 'trug' is ready, Jack; make haste and empty it, and Reuben's will be full by the time you come back."

The old gardener looks at his "trug," which contains about

a dozen roots and half-a-dozen stones, and chuckles over her ladyship's idea as though it were the best joke in the world.

"Now, bless your heart, my dear lady, I'm not so young as you are; I wish I was—I wish I was. It's the young that have the enjoyment of this world, as everybody knows."

"Do you think so, Reuben?" with a sigh. "I don't know. Life's burthen appears to me to be pretty equally apportioned to us all. How is the old wife's rheumatism this morning?"

"Well, it's wonderfully the better, my lady, for the embrocation you sent her; and she ate all the supper as Miss Ward had the goodness to bring last night. Oh, it's folks like yourself as makes life tolerable to the poor. Have you heard that we're to have new gentlefolk in the village, my lady?"

"No, Reuben. I've heard nothing about it," replies Lady Gwynne, as she returns to her employment. "What are their names?"

"I didn't rightly catch the name, my lady; indeed I can't say, as Bob Kent, who told me of it, had heard the name himself; but it's Fernside as they're looking after, the house on the right hand side as you drives into Warmouth."

"Oh, I know!" with sudden interest. "That pretty place that stands in a little kind of park, with large iron gates and a sunk fence on the roadside; the house that Mr Barnes tells me General Clifford lived in last year."

"That's the place, my lady; though as to its being so pretty, I don't know. I don't hold out to be any judge myself, but to my mind the Orchard House is the prettiest place about here by a good bit, and I said so long before you came to live in it."

"Fernside," she continues, musingly, and apparently without having paid any attention to the old gardener's last words, "I wonder who can have taken Fernside! It is too lonely and retired to suit most tastes. Do you know whether it is let furnished or unfurnished, Reuben?"

"That I can't tell you, my lady, but Mr Hawkins, the agent at Lymehurst, he told Bob Kent that it was let for a goodish spell, and the gentlefolks would be down most immediately. So I hope they'll prove good customers to Warmouth, for it wants 'em sadly."

"I hope they may," returns Lady Gwynne; but just at that moment she catches sight of the top of Mr Barnes' low-crowned clerical hat, rising above the wall that forms the boundary between her garden and the chapel, and leaves her occupation to run and give him some information respecting the parishioners he has placed beneath her care.

At the same time a maid-servant steps out of the opened windows of the drawing-room, and advances to the lawn.

"Mamma! there's some one wants to speak to you," shouts Daisy from her garden-chair; but Lady Gwynne is so earnestly discussing the ailments of the old and the delinquencies of the young, that she does not hear her daughter's summons.

"Mamma is engaged at this moment, Mary," decides Miss Gwynne. "I will tell her as soon as she is at leisure; you can go," and the servant departs accordingly.

In a few minutes Lady Gwynne walks thoughtfully back towards the lawn.

"Mamma, darling! Mary says there's some one waiting to see you."

"Who is it, Daisy?"

"She didn't say; some old woman or other, I suppose. Shall Jack run and ask?"

"No, no, dear! I know who it is. Nelly Barlow come about the Cochin China fowls. But she should have made up her mind before; I have already ordered some from Exeter. Shall I send Miss Ward to you? Emily has not returned from bathing yet; she is very late to-day."

"No, don't send any one; only, come back yourself as soon as you can. And, mother, do tell Nelly I want another kitten. Perhaps she may know of a pretty one."

"O Daisy! and you have three already."

"Now, mother, you know that Reuben has taken one for a stable cat, and Tommy never comes near the drawing-room, and Bessy is growing up so ugly."

"Well, I suppose it must be so, if my spoilt baby wants it." And the mother's eyes rest with ineffable tenderness upon the prostrate little form before her. Daisy appears to return the affection in full force.

"My own sweet mamma! I do love you so;" and she pulls down Lady Gwynne's face to be smothered in kisses,

not releasing it until it is crimson with the exertion, and half hidden by her fair tumbled *chevelure.*

"O mamma! you do look so pretty!"

Lady Gwynne laughs, and shakes back her hair, tucking it away beneath the fastening of her hat, as she walks towards the open drawing-room windows. She goes straight through them, believing the apartment to be empty, and is startled to find that her entrance causes a gentleman seated at the further end to rise to his feet—still more startled to discover in her unexpected visitor—Auberon Slade! The shock is great to her, but not so great as it has been in former times, and the only evidence she gives of it is by sitting down upon the first chair in her way before she has found words wherewith to welcome him; whilst he, apparently more agitated than herself, stands by the table where he has risen, neither coming forward nor offering his hand. She is the first to regain her speech and her composure—why do women always take the initiative in these cases?—and, leaving her seat, advances towards him with an outstretched hand.

"How do you do, Mr Slade? I had not the slightest idea you were here! No one told me of your arrival! How long have you been waiting for me?"

"Oh, not very long," he answers, politely; but in a nervous manner. "About ten minutes or so, perhaps."

"So stupid of my servants," she murmurs; "but you must excuse country training." And then, after a pause,—"Are you staying in Warmouth, or only passing through?"

"Well, I may say I am only passing through. I slept in Exeter last night; but I return to London this evening. You seem to have a charming little place down here"——

"Yes!—it is very comfortable and quiet."

"I thought I might venture, Lady Gwynne, as I was so near, to claim the privilege of an old friend, and make you an unceremonious visit. I was so desirous of seeing Daisy again—and—and—yourself, and to learn how you were getting on! You will forgive the unfashionable hour of my call."

"Oh, we are all unfashionable in Warmouth, Mr Slade, and I am sure Daisy will be charmed to renew her acquaintance with you. She often mentions your name, and has never forgotten your kindness to her. She has grown so much stronger since I brought her here."

"I am very glad to hear it! And will you think me very bold if I ask you to give me some luncheon?"

She smiles, but oh! so sadly, remembering the many meals they have partaken of together.

"I will do so with the greatest pleasure. You, with your Sybaritic tastes, will laugh to hear that we dine at two o'clock; but you can lunch at the same time. My hours are all regulated by Daisy's. I have no one but her to live for now"—and then, as though fearing her last words had said too much, she continues, quickly,—"you will meet an old Felton acquaintance also; Emily Musgrave is staying with me."

"And you like this place—you find it healthy, and the climate pleasant?"

"Very much so! I do not think I ever breathed a purer or more equable atmosphere."

"And yet you do not look as though it had agreed with you, Lady Gwynne!"

She blushes crimson beneath this remark; she knows that she has become painfully thin and delicate in appearance of late; but she is intensely angry that he should be bold enough to notice it.

As for Auberon Slade, he thinks he has never seen so great a change take place in any person in so short a time, and has been regarding her sunken cheeks and the dark circles that grief has drawn beneath her eyes, with the most painful interest, ever since she entered the apartment.

"Forgive me, Lady Gwynne!—I had no intention of offending you; but you really do not look well."

"My looks belie my feelings,"—she answers, coldly. "Had you seen the vigour with which I have been gardening all the morning, you would not believe there is much the matter with me. But it is half-past one, and I am really afraid I must leave you, Mr Slade, to prepare for dinner. Perhaps you would like to make a little preparation for it yourself?"

"I will just brush my hair," he answers, sadly.

"Mary will show you to a room," she says, with apparent carelessness, as she rings the drawing-room bell, and passes from his sight.

But, ushered into the spare bed-room, and provided with

all things necessary to his refreshment, Auberon Slade seems far more disposed to resolve into his old trick of falling into a reverie until the second bell shall wake him up again, than to display the activity necessary to the occasion. He leans on the window sill, and watches the old gardener at his work, and the arrival of Emily Musgrave, with her damp hair hanging down her back, and the transport of Daisy from the lawn to the dining-room, and sees and hears nothing of it all, whilst he muses on the altered looks of Gwendoline Gwynne, and dares to guess the reason of them! Oh! the torture of a reproachful memory; the still worse torture of knowing we have done that we can never again undo? He thinks, and sighs, and wishes to God he had died months ago, and left her at least the belief he was as worthy as she imagined him to be. Bah! what is the use of thinking, or crying over spilt milk; his fate and hers are fixed—they must make the best of it, as others have to do. But the word "fixed" jogs some lagging memory in his mind, and recalls the jangle of his own verses:—

> "Do what we will, thy fate and mine are fixed,
> My life and thine inevitably mixed."

Pshaw! What follies our brains do sometimes betray us into under the influence of cigars and brandy and water! The Felton mixture must have been a great deal too strong for his head *that* night—there is little doubt of that—and Auberon Slade dashes his face down into the basin of cool spring water that awaits him, as though he were endeavouring to wash away conviction and memory—and the summer dust, at one and the same time. At the luncheon table he is himself again, and so is Lady Gwynne. He, the polished, gallant, and witty Auberon Slade of olden times, and she as calm, dignified, and graceful in her demeanour as though she had never known her guest under any other aspect than that in which he now appears. Daisy is naturally clamorous in her welcome, and eager in her demands that "dear Auberon" should come at once and pitch his tent at Warmouth, close to the Orchard House (a contingency for which her mother heaves a grateful sigh that there is not the shadow of a chance), and Miss Musgrave (who has always entertained a lurking admiration for the fascinating poet) makes herself as agreeable as it is in her power to do; thereby unconsciously, but opportunely,

relieving her hostess from the onerous duty of conducting the conversation as though she were enjoying it; and by means of these two talkative tongues is at last produced the result which Lady Gwynne has been longing yet fearing to bring about—the introduction of the name of Mrs Auberon Slade.

"And so you are really married, Mr Slade!" remarks Miss Musgrave, when they are seated at table. "I was astonished to hear it. I should never have imagined you had sufficient nerve to make up your mind to such a thing! And how do you like domestic bliss? Confess you are already tired of it, and longing to return to a single life?" Mr Slade's mouth at the moment being full of roast chicken and tongue, either the situation or the question has the effect of making him look very uncomfortable.

"Now, it 's no good blushing over it," continues his tormenter; "and particularly as Mrs Slade is not here to profit by your delicate confusion! By the way, where *is* Mrs Slade? Is she so rash as to have let you out of leading strings already?"

"She is in London," he replies at last, with an awkwardness that appears comical to all present, except the one who guesses how much pain it carries with it. "We have been staying at her father's ever since we returned from the Continent."

"Why didn't you bring her with you, Auberon?" interposes Miss Daisy. "Mamma would have been so glad to see her; wouldn't you, mamma? And I want to see her too. I like pretty people. And one of your sisters was very kind to me; she sat nearly a whole afternoon once by my bedside in London, and told me stories about you and Miss Cameron—and she said Miss Cameron was so pretty!"

"My sisters have gone down to Blankshire again," he says, with an evident desire to change the subject. "I have not see them since my return."

"And when did you return, Mr Slade?" demands Miss Musgrave.

"A month ago—I was abroad more than three."

"So much as that?"

"Why! of course he must have been, Emily. He was married on the 10th of February. I remember that quite well, because it was the very same day that papa"——

"*Daisy!*" says the soft voice of her mother, warningly; and every one immediately commences to be exceedingly busy with the contents of his or her plate, whilst the spoilt child follows up her *mal-apropos* remark with the observation that she was sure she didn't know there was any harm in talking about it.

"But all this time we have not heard what business brings you to Warmouth?" says Miss Musgrave, with a view to setting the party more at their ease, and Auberon Slade replies, in rather a hesitating manner, that he came down to see a friend; and immediately begins to talk of something else. But, after dinner, finding himself alone in the drawing-room with Lady Gwynne, he speaks more freely.

"You do not seem at all curious to learn what brought me to this part of the country, Lady Gwynne?"

"I think Emily put the question to you at dinner, and you seemed disinclined to answer it."

"That must have been because I was uncertain how you would receive my news. Will you be glad, I wonder!" coming closer to her, "or sorry, to hear that I contemplate settling down at Warmouth?"

The unwelcome intelligence takes her so completely by surprise that she is thrown off her guard, and the incredulous energy with which she exclaims, "Never!" shows how distasteful the idea is to her. And though the next moment she recovers herself, and follows up her exclamation with the lame excuse, "because it is out of the way—so very far from London!" her first look and word have betrayed her real feelings on the subject, and Auberon Slade answers them alone.

"I did not think—I hoped, at least, that the prospect of our becoming neighbours would have been as agreeable to you as to myself, Lady Gwynne."

"Oh, of course! why should it not be?" though she is trembling all over with agitation. "Only, I scarcely think you can be aware what a very quiet place this is."

"The quieter the better. The fact is, my health has been very unequal of late, and the doctors say that if I live in London all the year round it will break down altogether. Besides, mental labour requires mental rest."

"But Warmouth is such a distance from town."

"Only four hours' journey by train."

"It is such a dull place."

"*You* manage to live here."

"Oh, I am different. Daisy takes up all my time. But you—you have a young wife, and I think you ought to consider her. Mrs Slade has been used to amusement and gaiety, and there is none here."

At this allusion he frowns.

"My wife must learn to be amused with what amuses me."

"But there is really no society here fit for a young married lady. Besides the doctor's and the clergyman's wives, there is no one living in the place."

"There is yourself, Lady Gwynne."

It is now her turn to frown, and her answer is delivered very coldly.

"I am afraid you must place no dependence upon me, for, as I said before, my time is fully occupied, and I visit nowhere."

"Do you mean, then, utterly to desert me? Are we never to be friends again?"

There is an echo of old times in the tone in which he pronounces these words that reaches the very centre of her heart; and as she answers him, lightly and almost gaily, pulling the flowers about in a vase as she speaks, she is obliged to turn her face away.

"I was not aware that we had ever been anything less. But you must know, Mr Slade, that the intimacy of two women who have never seen each other rests on a contingency. Your wife may not choose to receive me as a friend."

"By Jove! if she does not."

"Wait a minute—I had not finished my sentence—or I may not take a fancy to her! You see I am candid with you; but I am so, in order to prevent the fact of my living in Warmouth having any influence upon your choice of a residence."

"Unfortunately you speak too late," he answers, gloomily; "I have already signed an agreement to take Fernside.

"For how long?"

"Three years."

"Oh, I *am* so sorry!"

It is an awkward speech, which slips from her unawares, and is followed by a long silence on either part; he, pulling

his moustaches and looking out of the window; and she, disarranging all the ornaments upon her drawing-room table.

They are looking to speak the truth to one another—these two who, but so short a time before, shared every thought and feeling, she, to tell him how miserable and unsettled the prospect of daily meeting him will render her; and he, to ask her pardon for having, by his rash impetuosity, destroyed the little comfort faith in him had left.

But ah! the bonds and trammels of this world's etiquette—the wretched pride that makes us shrink from confessing we are faithful—it prevents these hearts from speaking for each other's good—it even prompts them to an acted falsehood! She tries to ask him, for both their sakes, to relinquish his determination; even to sacrifice his money, but she dares not; the very entreaty would betray too much. And feeling that her last speech is indicative of too vivid an interest in his proceedings, she attempts to rectify it by a huge assumption of indifference, and has not rattled about those unfortunate ornaments for more than five minutes before she speaks again.

"What a stupid speech for me to have made! I *do* feel sorry, of course (at least as sorry as one *can* feel, about a matter of such pure indifference as the taking of a house), but only because I'm afraid you'll be disappointed in your choice. Warmouth is a very stupid place, and full of very stupid people; so I hope you will prepare Mrs Slade for what she may expect, beforehand."

"But you will be her friend, will you not?"

The question is addressed so seriously and sadly, that it puts her affected carelessness to flight.

"If you wish it, I will"——

"Thank you—so much!"

Again they both are silent!

The bright June sun is streaming in at the unclosed windows, the whole place is hushed and still, everything seems to be at rest; except these two turbulent fast-beating hearts.

"Gwendoline!"

"Yes!" and she turns and looks at him.

"Be her friend, be mine," entreatingly. "She is very young, very ignorant, and very undisciplined, and God only knows how it will all turn out; I don't; I scarcely dare to inquire,

or to think. But through it all I have held fast one hope—that you would stand my friend, and help me."

"Oh! I will, *I will;* I never dreamt of this."

"We won't look back; it is of no use going over old ground, but I am not happy. You may guess so much as that. And I thought—I hoped, perhaps in coming here"——

"I see—I understand it all. You need say no more. And you had my promise—you have it still. I will do what I can to serve you."

She might add, "I will sacrifice myself anew for you"—but she does not.

A true woman never stoops to contemplate the self-denial that she exercises.

"I will not attempt to thank you. You know better than I could describe what I am feeling at this present moment."

"Let us go into the garden, it will be cool under the trees; and you shall tell me all about Fernside. And I have not shown you my pony and cow yet, nor my ducks and chickens. Do come!"

She is all eagerness now to turn the current of his thoughts; for, with a woman's instinct, she sees that they are harking back to the days at Felton, and the dear, dangerous moments they passed together there. Nor is her own mind entirely without need of distraction; it is as hard for a woman as for a man to calmly see the creature she loves in the possession of another. And so they talk of eggs, and butter, and cheese, and the profits of a kitchen garden till the time arrives for her to send him to the nearest railway station in her pony-carriage; and she has leisure to believe that it is indeed true; and Auberon Slade once more about to become her companion and her friend. The glories of the setting sun have, by this time, long departed from Warmouth, and a dull, hazy blue mist settled down upon the valley and the village. Yet the eyes of Lady Gwynne, gazing at it from her drawing-room windows, seem able to pierce through the evening gloom, and descry strange figures toiling up and down its hilly paths—and she thinks the little place has never looked so fair to her before.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

PERPLEXING DOUBTS.

NEVERTHELESS her heart is troubled and her mind ill at ease; and long after Miss Ward and Emily Musgrave and the remainder of the household have retired to rest, Gwendoline Gwynne sits by the open window of her sleeping chamber, gazing out upon the tranquil, starlit night, and wondering whether this unexpected alteration in her life will be for good or evil. Will she never cease to be haunted by the remembrance of the past? Is its phantom doomed to cross her daily path? Can she find no refuge from Auberon Slade, and the memory of what he has been to her? Here had she settled herself, as she supposed, in peace; far from the busy world of London; out of earshot of its turmoil and its tongues of scandal; out of reach of its incessant round of business or of pleasure; and yet even here, at the extremity of England, environed by miles of country road and hidden in unfashionable obscurity, has he discovered, tracked, and followed her; not to administer comfort, but only to open her old wounds afresh. Are not retired places sufficiently abundant in the land that he needs must pounce upon the little haven she has found out for herself, and change the quiet and contented life that she has led there thitherto into a scene of envy and repining? What can he mean by it? what object have in view in coming there? what comfort hope to draw from a contemplation of her distress? As Lady Gwynne tries to picture what her future life will prove, when not a moment in the day will leave her free from the fear of encountering either himself or his wife; of meeting them upon the road or receiving them in her own house, she grows more and more disposed to blame the author of her trouble. It was inconsiderate, cruel, unmanly of him to have engaged Fernside without a single reference to her feelings on the subject; and though (moved by the sudden pathos of his appeal for a continuation of her friendship) she has promised to do all she can to serve him, she believes now, in her cooler moments, that that service can never be rendered

in the form of intimacy with his wife. His wife!—Charlotte Cameron!—the ordinary, heavy-looking creature, whose representation was shown her in the photographic album,—is it possible that she could ever amalgamate with such a woman; exchange thoughts with her; take interest in anything she said or did?

Lady Gwynne is not altogether above the weaknesses of her sex, very far from it; and there is a strong fibre of feminine jealousy running through all the phases of her mind this night; but if it causes her to be unjust, she will be the first to discover and try to atone for the offence. How often she has tortured her heart, during the last few months, by vain attempts to picture Auberon Slade in his domestic life, and fancifully drawn his wife as a dozen different women, whilst she conjectured by which character the memory of herself would be the soonest blotted out. Now, as she tries to realise that very soon her suppositions will turn to realities, and the peace of her own life be invaded by the real presence of her unwelcome ideal, the old imaginations return to her mind and make her wonder freshly which image Mrs Auberon Slade will actually resemble. Looking out upon the silent scene before her, which the June moon lights up almost as bright as day, she seems to watch this dreaded rival, walking up and down the narrow garden paths, and, Proteus-like, changing her shape and feelings with every turn she takes. First, as the inanimate and stolid girl, which Lady Gwynne has always imagined her to be; sulky in temperament, difficult to please, disgusted with the dulness of the country, and very *exigeante* with regard to the amount of attention to be paid her by her husband. Could she like her if she appeared under such a guise—even bring herself, by force of charity, to appear interested in any of her occupations or pursuits? Lady Gwynne thinks of it, shudders, and turns away. But then she sees her bright, lively, and fashionable—but uneducated, unrefined, of a grade lower than her own; and feels that the first impersonation would be preferable to the last. Will she be satisfied (so she asks herself) if she finds that the bride, although possessing divers faults, is devoted to her husband, hangs on his words, follows his looks, anticipates his wishes, *loves* him, in short, as a woman *can* love.

But at this picture she sighs heavily, and covers up her

face with both her hands; yet cannot persuade herself she will be better pleased if Mrs Slade proves indifferent and cold; heedless of Auberon's comfort; unmindful of his wishes; if she is the means of making him, as he said to-day he already felt himself to be, unhappy? Oh, if she be so, the wife should witness the dark, indignant flush that rises to another woman's cheek in rebuke of her supposed indifference! But it is useless; believe her to be what she may; even as her final thoughts present her, an honest, kindly, warm-hearted girl, pleased with everything around, and more than honoured by the station to which she has been raised, Lady Gwynne cannot persuade herself that she will ever be found capable of rousing her affection, or bestowing any particle upon her in return. It would be unnatural; an anomaly such as had never been seen in the world before, that she should include this woman, whatever she may be, in the circle of her friends, and bid her hearty welcome. And yet she has promised to do so; and above all other virtues, the truth of Gwendoline Gwynne rises pre-eminent. She has *promised* to do all she can to serve him. Let it be so, then, at whatever cost to herself. She is not one to go back from her word, and feels that after what she has already passed through, she must have strength enough for anything! And, after all, it is *his* cruelty, *his* want of feeling she should blame, for his wife, whatever her shortcomings, has taken but a passive part in increasing the burden of her pain; and can know nothing of incidents in the past life of her, to whom she will be so soon desired to hold out the right hand of friendship. It is *he* that has inflicted this fresh wound on her—who so recklessly spears the heart he has already trampled in the dust. It is *his* presence alone which she should fear to meet. And yet, perhaps, he needs her—feels now that it is too late; that a little patient resignation on his part would have reaped a fuller harvest than life can ever yield him in the future; and yearns for her sympathy, her help, her counsel, the only boon which it remains to her to give him. Shall she refuse it? *Shall she?—Can she?* Witness her swelling breast, her throbbing heart, her humid, liquid eyes turned up so steadfastly, and yet so mournfully, towards the placid summer moon. She does not cry; for though Gwendoline Gwynne has almost learned to be contented with her lot, and appear

so before others, tears and laughter are alike unknown to her (it appears as though she had outlived such strong expression of her feelings), but she devotes a few moments to the memory of the past, and thanks God at the close of them that He has left her still a duty, however trifling, to perform for him, who yet remains (notwithstanding all her efforts to displace him) the dearest creature in the world to her. Yes, she will do it for his sake! She will not shrink back from the promise she has made—she will be brave (she knows she *can* be), and meet him and his wife upon new ground; as two friends who have been recommended to her notice and consideration, but whose characters she has yet to learn, and amalgamate with her own. And then she rises from her seat of contemplation, and goes to her prayers, refreshed and calm; more, almost glad that events have been so ordered that the last link between her life and Auberon Slade's is not yet snapped asunder. But let no one mistake her satisfaction, which arises from the knowledge, not that her unlawful inclinations are about to be indulged, but that she has been enabled to overcome a feeling which she knew to be unworthy of her. She has no unlawful inclination remaining in her breast. There couch sore trouble, keen disappointment, and a bitter memory; but she would not so much as place her hand within the grasp of Auberon Slade if the touch called forth one desire which she believed it wrong to cherish. For during the last few months a great change has passed over her soul; religion has made its final powerful appeal to her, and Lady Gwynne, of the Orchard House, at Warmouth, is no more like the reckless, self-sacrificing creature, whose heart was melted into water by the touching voices of the choir boys at Felton, than a feeble, wailing infant is to a sturdy child. She has passed through the furnace of affliction, and come thence purified seven times in the fire. And with her strength has arisen a vast pity, a tender compassion for the weaknesses of others; and especially for those of Auberon Slade. For she knows that he is not a religious man; that he is utterly unmindful of the sources from which she has drawn her consolation; and she has longed (how often since they parted she could not say) that it were her lot to impart to him some of the spiritual comfort which has been so mercifully vouchsafed to herself. And now, perhaps, this great privilege

will be placed within her power; it will be given to her unworthy hands (which have robbed him of so much) to requite him in some degree for the disappointment of the past; to return into his bosom full measure, pressed down and running over. Oh! if it were but God's will that it should be so! Yet, with all these useful, holy resolutions passing through her mind, Lady Gwynne is not quite sure of the advisability—the wisdom—even of the virtue of her resolve, as is evidenced by the very timid and conscious manner in which she introduces the subject in her next letter to Mr Laurence. She would not keep it from him for the world (even if she could do so), for ever since their separation she has been used to write and consult him on all her little difficulties, temporal and spiritual; but she is rather uncertain in what mind he will receive her present news; for though the name of Auberon Slade has never passed her lips or his, they know equally well who has been the destroyer of her peace of mind.

"Do you remember Fernside?" she inquires in a postscript, after she has filled two sheets of note-paper with accounts of Daisy's health; the pony's puffy leg; and a mysterious robbery which has been committed on her hen-roost; "a very pretty place, which was occupied by General Clifford when you were here in the summer? It is let again on a lease of three years, and to that Mr Slade who came down to Felton Hall for the shooting last season; and whose marriage you may have chanced since to read in the papers. I was astonished when I heard it. I had not the slightest idea they intended to settle in the country, and I think it is very likely they will be disappointed with so quiet a place as Warmouth, and think it dull. Oh! why are you not here instead of at Felton? I do miss you so much! Mr Barnes is very good and kind, but frightfully strict in all his notions of religion, and his conversations rather depress than cheer me. You know what a bad creature I am, and how much encouragement I require in order to make me persevere in doing right; and I miss the cheerfulness with which you used to look on the bright side of everything, and laugh away my stupid fears."

So she writes, and guesses by the answer what her friend's thoughts are, although he says but little on the subject.

"I was grieved to read your postscript, and wish, with you, that we were nearer to each other. You will need to be

more than usually cautious in your behaviour; and I shall not forget to ask Heaven to grant you all the strength that you require."

No more than this; but his correspondent takes the words for all they are intended to convey; and he knows that she will understand them. A month passes,—a glorious summer month, during which they alternately revel in salt water and hayfields (a combination of pleasures not often obtainable in this country), and live on strawberries and clotted cream; and Lady Gwynne hears nothing more of the irruption upon Fernside, although preparations for the reception of the new tenant are being vigorously carried on the while. And then comes a note from Auberon Slade—short and formal, though capable, by its mere appearance, of making her heart beat more rapidly—to announce their intended advent; after which, vans of furniture pass through the village; and upholsterers' men from London are lodged at the sign of the "Coach and Horses," and Reuben informs his mistress that the "strange gentlefolk" have entered on possession of Fernside, and brought "a mort of servants" with them. She knows then that her time is come, and it will be expected of her to call on the bride; yet she puts off the ordeal from day to day, upon the plea that they must be in terrible confusion, and not in a condition to receive visitors. Until one evening, on returning from her stroll, she finds his card upon the hall table; and feels that, without impoliteness, she cannot longer excuse herself from making the acquaintance of his wife. But, on the following afternoon, as she is ready robed for the occasion, and only waiting for her pony-carriage to come round, another card is put into her hand, on which she reads the name of Major Calvert. Lady Gwynne flies down to the drawing-room to receive him; for, notwithstanding a trifling coldness on his part, and timidity on hers, which rose up between them after she contracted so intimate a friendship with Auberon Slade, Major Calvert is a great favourite amongst her acquaintance; and the welcome she now extends to him—tears standing in her grey eyes from excitement the while—is as hearty as any he received at Felton Hall.

"I am so glad to see you again. It is such a treat to meet a well-known face down here. And I had almost begun to fear that all my old friends had forgotten me."

The Major, who is a handsome, fine-looking fellow of about forty, appears as delighted at the *rencontre* as herself.

"It will be a long time before I do *that*, Lady Gwynne; or forget the kindness either which you have so often shown me. But I was afraid to—that is, I was not quite certain whether I might—intrude myself upon your notice earlier."

"My dear friend! you should have known me better. It could never have given me anything but pleasure to meet you again. But where are you staying?—not here?"

"No; I rode over from Leymouth, where my mother and sisters have a house for the season. But I should have come to see you any way, as soon as I had ascertained I should be welcome."

"How good of you! But what have you done with your horse."

"I left him at the inn."

"What a shame! underrating my possessions in that way; as if I hadn't stables. But you have not dined; you will stay and have some cold meat at our early tea,—we are horribly primitive here."

"I should have been delighted, but I promised my mother to be back at seven."

"Oh, that is a nuisance; because we have just finished dinner, and it will be so inhospitable to send you back without breaking bread together."

"Another time, Lady Gwynne, perhaps. I have broken your bread often enough, I think, to free you from the suspicion of inhospitality. All I want now is your society, if you will spare it me."

Here she recalls her mission, and is perplexed. Major Calvert sees it by the expression of her countenance.

"But you were going out. I am detaining you, perhaps."

"I was going out to make a call; but I am not sure that it is absolutely necessary. By the way, Major Calvert, who do you imagine I was going to call on?"

"How can I tell?"

"They are old friends of yours,—at least one of them is."

'I have so many old friends."

"The Auberon Slades."

She gives the information lightly, in order to disguise her

feelings; but Major Calvert appears to have no hesitation in revealing his. The intelligence decidedly displeases him.

"The Auberon Slades! What the dev—(I beg your pardon, Lady Gwynne)—I mean, what on earth can they be doing down here?"

"They have taken a house on the opposite side of the village for three years, and furnished it."

Major Calvert's turquoise-tinted eyes open to their fullest extent.

"Going to live here! Taken up their residence for good! You astonish me."

"I was quite as much surprised as you are," she answers, but rather consciously, as she plays with the bugle trimming of her dress; "but I expect they will soon be tired of it, and wish themselves back in London."

"He will,—I don't know about her,—but Slade settled down to a country life; it is incredible! Does he give any motive for the freak?"

"He told me it was on account of his health."

"His health—stuff and nonsense! he is as well as I am, though he dissipated enough whilst he was abroad this spring to have broken any constitution but an iron one. You know, Lady Gwynne—you must excuse my saying so—that Slade was never a particular favourite of mine; but since his marriage, I have liked him less than ever."

"You were always a little hard on him," she cries, eagerly; "and judged too much from appearances. But whatever his faults, I think his friends must forgive them to him now, for, from all I hear, I do not fancy he can have made a very happy marriage."

The lowered voice, unconsciously tender, in which she finishes her sentence infuriates the Major.

"Well! and if he has not, it is his own look-out. No one asked him to marry the girl; he was prompted to do it by his egregious vanity alone."

"His vanity?"

"Yes; and nothing else. She is a good enough little creature, but an awful fool, and so much in love with Slade (though Heaven only knows what she saw to fall in love with) that she had no capability of hiding it. She was at his feet—literally at his feet—the whole of last season, when he was so

taken up with Lady Mary St Maur; but he had no time to attend to her till he came back from Felton; and then, having nothing better to do, I suppose, and the same process commencing all over again, he gave in, and asked her to marry him. And now he's repenting at leisure; which is the only result he could have anticipated."

"Is she so very fond of him, then?"

"Most frightfully spoony, so I've heard; and you see, Lady Gwynne, Auberon Slade is not the man who can stand that sort of thing. He is so egregiously vain, that he would succumb to any woman who betrayed a liking for him, and forget her as easily as he succumbs. But that is no reason he should behave badly to the girl who is unfortunate enough to be his wife."

Pleasant opinions to be discussed before the woman who has adored him—confessed her preference—been succumbed to, and—forgotten! Yet she listens, and makes no sign, except the ordinary sign of interest.

"Surely he does not ill-treat her."

"There are so many ways in which a man can ill-treat his wife, Lady Gwynne"—(Ah! she could have told him that!) "I don't suppose Slade beats his, or is even unkind to her; but he is perfectly indifferent, and allows all the world to see it."

"Oh! that is very wrong!"

"It is quite the talk of his club at the present moment. Men can be careless enough, God knows! but it is not every man who will openly inform his friends that he has married simply from motives of interest and convenience, and that one woman would have served his turn as well as another."

"It is lowering himself as well as her," she replies, with a burning cheek that glows with shame for him.

"But Auberon Slade is essentially selfish, and always was so; and in this matter, as in all others, has simply consulted his own convenience. But I pity his poor wife."

"Does she feel it?"

"I imagine that she must; I have not seen her since her marriage, but she is a very warm-hearted girl, and a perfect fool with regard to her love for him. I am sure you will like *her*, Lady Gwynne, if she is not too much charmed by your cleverness and superiority in every way to show herself in her true colours."

"O Major Calvert! don't pay me any meaningless compliments. I am past all that sort of thing."

There is so mournful a ring in the tone in which she utters these words, that his heart smites him for what he has said to her, though he believes that he has spoken but the truth.

"Your pony-chaise has been waiting for you some time," he continues, after a pause. "I must not detain you from your visit any longer."

"No, no; I shall not go to-day. It is really of no such vital consequence. I can write a note to Mrs Slade instead, and tell her I have been prevented by the arrival of a friend."

"Don't mention my name, pray, or I shall never be forgiven; and I suppose I must leave a card there myself some day."

"It would be but polite. Come, then, Major Calvert, if you will not give up your late dinner for our early tea (which I consider very rude of you), let me at least take you round our property (Daisy's property, I should say, since the Orchard House belongs to her), and show you what a famous farmwoman I have become. I assure you I am very proud of my chickens, for there has been a regular murrain amongst the poultry this year, and there is scarcely one to be got for love or money. But what should you know about chickens? I daresay you hardly recognise them when they are placed on the mess-table."

"Hardly," he rejoins, laughing, as he stumbles after her out of the drawing-room window, and proceeds on his tour of inspection.

Two things about Lady Gwynne are wonderfully puzzling the honest soldier, for he cannot reconcile them with each other. One is, the increased youthfulness of her appearance; the other, the increased look of pain upon her brow. Why should she have seemed older, and yet less full of care at Felton Hall? What, had he been told that Heaven, in bidding her bend beneath a fresh burden, had mercifully removed the old pressure from her life, lest two such weights combined should crush her! And Sir Lyster's death had opportunely relieved her from an hourly aggravation at the very moment she was called upon to bear the trial of Auberon Slade's unfaith. The life and liberty restored to her by widowhood have given back her youth and sense of freedom;

but those new lines across her forehead have been indented by the knowledge that life and liberty have come too late to leave her peace of mind. Still, let Lady Gwynne be grateful! Her trouble might have been a heavier one, and she well knows it. The possession of such a husband, and such a lover, at one and the same time, would be too much for the strength of most women. Yet women in the world have had to bear it.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MRS AUBERON SLADE.

THE note of apology is sent to Mrs Auberon Slade, and the next afternoon sees Lady Gwynne, with downcast looks and loitering steps, walking slowly in the direction of Fernside, to fulfil the promise which it contained. Her interview with Major Calvert has left her more than usually depressed. She has been perplexed and worried before this to account for the conduct of Auberon Slade; compelled, against her will, to call him fickle, inconstant, and weak of purpose, and forced with many bitter tears to acknowledge that *her* love and *her* sympathy have lost their power to chain his wandering fancy; but it has been more regret than blame that her heart has held for him; she has never yet seriously believed him to be unworthy of her regard. And how is it possible she can bring that heart to credit that she has been but one of many; and that he finds as little difficulty in trifling with the affections of the woman he has made his wife as he did with hers. For, as to her own pain, it is but what she deserves, and Heaven, doubtless, designed as part of the curse to follow her transgression, for she has sinned and led him into sin, and it is but just that she should suffer the penalty of wrong; but this lamb, what can she have done to be entitled to so hard a recompense? Major Calvert's words have presented the bride in a new light to her rival's eyes, which have pictured her as triumphant, scornful, devoted, and indifferent by turns, but never as a woman already injured by neglect; a fellow-sufferer, with claims upon her pity. And Lady Gwynne's warm heart

is already responding to the mute appeal. To a lesser nature, the thought that Auberon Slade is callous to the attractions of his wife's beauty and affection might afford ignoble pleasure, from the lurking hope that such indifference arises from the impossibility of extinguishing the memory of herself; but Gwendoline Gwynne is far above such petty feelings. She loves *him:* not her own good, and when he fails she cannot triumph. She hopes against hope that Major Calvert may have been mistaken in the communication that he made to her (for she knows from experience that men are not always the best friends that each might have behind the other's back), and that Auberon Slade has not so degraded his better nature and the distinction he can make between right and wrong, as, whatever his thoughts about his wife may be, to let the world guess at and comment on them. And yet, how could an honourable man and a gentleman have known them else? Is it possible the day will ever shine when she shall be unable to think of Auberon Slade himself by those terms? O Heaven! forbid it! As this thought presses on Lady Gwynne's brain, and makes her cheek glow with shame for him, she recognises, for the first time, how true it is that any calamity is better than that we should *blush* for those we love. Separation, estrangement, death—anything is preferable to the fact that we should be unable to lift up our heads, and say, "Whatever my present loss, my blame, my despair, I am still proud to know that I *have been* beloved." And should this consolation be taken from her, Gwendoline Gwynne will know that all that has gone before is little in comparison with it. "Is there," she is thinking to herself as she enters the carriage-drive of Fernside; "is there any era in our lives when we can confidently say that pain has lost its power over us, and suffering reached its limit? I suppose not—yet there *must* come a time when Nature will lay down her arms, and fight no more! Oh! for an increase of strength—for greater faith in the happiness that shall be revealed to us! At this moment I feel as weak as a child in the prospect of all that is before me. I suffer as much as though I had a right to suffer." The path through which she toils up to the house is beautiful, and at any other time would immediately have attracted her attention; for she walks on turf which is canopied by trees, and fringed with broad-leaved ferns, from beneath

which, every now and then, the innocent wistful face of a little rabbit peeps at her cunningly, and disappears again. Lady Gwynne is essentially fond of nature. Even at Felton Hall, about which she found great difficulty in preserving anything that did not prove useful to Sir Lyster, his horses or his dogs, she had contrived to discover and retain one or two uncultivated little spots, in which to nurse her romantic fancies. And Fernside, with its fine old trees and wild, wilderness-like surroundings, is purely a poet's paradise, which, under any other circumstances, would have called forth her warmest admiration. But just now, her mind is too much filled with one idea to have any leisure to observe outward things, the hope that she shall not encounter both Auberon Slade and his wife at the same time, and her desire is gratified ; for when she is shewn into the drawing-room she finds it empty. It is an apartment capable of being made both habitable and pretty, being low and long, and opening with French windows to the flower garden. But as Lady Gwynne first sees it, there is a painful air of discomfort about the whole. The carpet, and curtains, although in good taste, are too new to look like home, and, apparently, no effort has been made, by a judicious arrangement of lace curtains, table-covers, or Indian matting, to soften down their vivid colouring. The furniture also seems to have been left just as the upholsterers' men may have placed it—the table in the centre of the room ; the chairs against the wall ; the piano closed and locked, with an empty Canterbury standing beside it. Lady Gwynne, remembering the genuine approbation which Auberon Slade's taste used to accord to her drawing-room at Felton, over which books and music, and *objets d'art* (from every quarter of the globe) were scattered lavishly on a background of purple velvet and ebony, looks round the prim apartment with dismay, and wonders what *he* can be about, not to give his young wife a kindly hint or two upon the subject. Why is there no ornament upon that sternly polished table except a huge Bohemian vase, guiltless of flowers ; no books, save two photographic albums, a crimson Longfellow, and a green morocco Tennyson ; and on the mantelpiece, a clock, so fresh from the maker's hands that its glittering ormolu is almost blinding to look upon ; a pair of candelabra, and a horrid likeness of the master of the house in a magnificent frame, in which he appears very stiff, very uncom-

fortable, and eminently unlike himself? How femininely anxious Lady Gwynne becomes to pull the chairs out of their places, and disarrange those odious books and strew the table with flowers, and the piano with music, and make the room look as if some one sometimes sat in it! She wonders how Auberon can stand anything so formal and precise. It fidgets her to think how different she could make the place look if she had her will; she gets so excited as almost to forget the nervous agitation with which she entered the apartment. But she is recalled to it by the approach of a light step in the passage, and the sound of a girlish voice, speaking, not very confidently, outside the door, which in a moment more opens, and brings her face to face with Mrs Auberon Slade. At least, so she concludes, although the reality so far exceeds her expectations, that Lady Gwynne is almost tempted to inquire if she *has* the honour of addressing the mistress of Fernside. A figure, too plump perhaps to promise grace in the future, though very taking in the present, with its rosy flush of health and youthful dimples, two little rounded hands extended rather timidly to meet her own, and large, innocent blue eyes looking up inquiringly in her face; this is all the impression that Lady Gwynne takes in on a first view of the wife of Auberon Slade. But, when she has time to examine her more minutely, she perceives that the hair which the treacherous photograph had represented as almost black, is of a reddish brown; that the eyes, wide open, and of too light a hue, are just the sort of eyes that the sun delights in passing over altogether; and that the greatest charm of the whole face, its expression of childish simplicity, is lost when animation ceases, since no look of thought comes to replace the vanished sparkle. So that, in her own mind, Lady Gwynne can perfectly account for the wrong impression given her by Miss Cameron's picture. The young wife, clad in a thin muslin dress, through which, perhaps, her neck and shoulders gleam a trifle too rosily to please such as think a woman's beauty null without refinement, comes forward shyly, with those clear blue eyes which seem to plead for welcome, fixed anxiously upon her guest. No look of pride or triumph, even of satisfaction, appears in the gaze which meets that of Gwendoline Gwynne; but a shrinking bashfulness and hesitation; a humility which, under any circumstances, would have appealed to her best feelings and insured the suppliant a kind reception. But there is something more;

another feeling apparent in the face of Charlotte Slade, that bringing to her visitor's mind the words of Major Calvert, touches her heart more nearly than anything else could have done. And this is the outward sign of untold trouble—the dim violet circles draw about the eyes; the slight depression at the corners of the pouting mouth; the weary, wistful look that has already settled on the rounded face. Slight tokens, perhaps, and held of little count by the world, but easily recognised by a fellow-sufferer; and as the girl advances to Lady Gwynne, and she reads in her countenance the truth of what she has been told—that, apparently in the possession of all good, the wife of Auberon Slade is yet not happy—a great compassion seizes her—a vehement desire to impart some comfort, to express some sympathy, with one more injured than herself—and, acting on her generous impulse, she seizes the younger woman by the hand, and, drawing her almost eagerly to her breast, kisses her three or four times upon the forehead. The bride does not hold back, nor even shrink from the unexpected embrace; but having received the baptism of friendship, looks up in the sweet, earnest face of her guest for a few moments, wonderingly, almost alarmedly—and then, with a little cry of surprise and pleasure combined, throws herself again into her arms, and begins to whimper.

"My dear Mrs Slade!—how foolish of me!—I have been too abrupt—will you forgive me?—I should have asked your leave first."

So pleads Lady Gwynne, in broken sentences, for there are tears in her own eyes; but it is some time before the little bride can answer her.

"Oh no!" swallowing back her tears like a child that is trying not to cry; "it is all my fault, Lady Gwynne! I think it is so very kind of you—but I was afraid to meet you—and so nervous—and it is different to what I had expected—that's all."

"Afraid to meet me, my dear! but why? I am a very ordinary person."

"Oh! no! indeed you are not—at least Auberon always says so. He is never tired of talking about you, and telling me how good you are, and clever, and well-read. And at last he made me quite shy of meeting you, for fear—for fear"——

"For fear of what?"

Mrs Slade hangs her head dejectedly.

"That you should think me so very, *very* silly in comparison!"

"My dear girl! I certainly shall think so if you talk such nonsense."

"Oh! but I *am* silly. Auberon says so, and I know it perfectly well. But I never seemed to find it out whilst I I was at home!"

"There are very few girls, you must remember, whose minds would not fall in their own estimation when first brought in contact with a man like Mr Slade. We women have not the same advantages as men. Your husband's knowledge used to make me feel very foolish sometimes, in the days when we were friends together."

She is so eager to console the humbled little heart beside her, that she is forgetting the claims of her own.

"I can hardly believe that, though he is so clever! A great deal too clever for me! And I thought you would be the same, Lady Gwynne, and would never care to have me for a friend; and, indeed, I hardly think so now—only I feel a little lonely here, at first—it is all so strange, you know; and coming away from home, and"——

"I understand it all," was the ready answer, "and can perfectly sympathise in your feelings. It is a dull work entering a new home with no one to help or advise you. But I am an old housekeeper, and if I can be of any use to you, Mrs Slade, you must not hesitate to let me know."

"How kind you are—how very kind! How foolish of me to have been afraid. But please don't call me 'Mrs Slade.' There are so few here to say my Christian name."

"What must I call you?"

"Lottie; everybody calls me Lottie, and it will make me feel so much as if I had a friend in Warmouth."

"You have one, my dear girl, you may depend upon that; and now you must tell me when you will come up to the Orchard House, and visit me. I shall expect to see you there very often; whenever you like, in fact, for I am very much tied to home by attendance on my little girl, of whose accident perhaps you may have heard."

"Oh yes! Auberon told me. She fell over the balustrades into the hall, and you were not with her. How sad it must have been."

"I was not with her at the moment," replies Lady Gwynne, blushing hotly to remember where she was "at the moment"—"but she had every attention as soon as it could be given: and I thank God it has not turned out so serious as we once anticipated. She is obliged to lie on her back for the present; but we hope to see her walking about again a few years hence, and, meanwhile, she is very cheerful and patient, and willing to submit to everything that is thought good for her."

"What a dear little thing! How I shall like to go and sit with her sometimes! Lady Gwynne, might I—if it is not asking too much"——

Lady Gwynne waits for a continuation of the sentence.

"Well, my dear!" she says at last. "If you wouldn't mind—if it wouldn't be inconvenient, that is to say—might I walk back to the Orchard House with you now?"

Lady Gwynne laughs at the earnestness with which the request is made.

"Is that all? Of course you may; I shall be delighted to have your company. But are you sure you will not be wanted here?"

"Oh yes!" a little sadly. "I am sure not to be missed, and I have not been out all day; because Auberon does not like my going outside the drive gates alone."

"He will soon countermand that order here. Warmouth is such a very quiet place."

"I hope he will, or else how shall I ever go to see you?"

"Of course he will. We will not imagine otherwise for a moment. But now, if you are really going to be so good as to walk back with me, I think it is time we were upon the move."

Mrs Slade flies out of the room, and in another minute returns with a lace shawl thrown over her shoulders, and a coquettish little hat set on the summit of her auburn hair. She links her arm in that of Lady Gwynne, as though she had known her for ten years, for she is one of those creatures who do everything by extremes; and will be as confidently familiar now as she was before unreasonably alarmed. But Gwendoline Gwynne does not repulse the friendly action—on the contrary, it rather pleases her; for she has taken a fancy to the girl, and feels relieved to find that she *can* like her, and that a great load is lifted off her breast in consequence. It is

not the liking begotten of reciprocity of sentiment or congeniality of disposition, for no two characters could be more dissimilar than hers and that of Charlotte Slade—she sees that at a glance—it is rather the compassion, heaven born, for one weaker, simpler, and in every respect less fitted to contend with the world's troubles than herself; and yet, perhaps, mysteriously gifted with as large a capability of suffering. She feels towards her, much as she thinks she might feel for Daisy under the same circumstances; as though she could do battle for her, long after she had laid down arms in her own cause. And she marches down the grass-grown drive of Fernside with Mrs Auberon Slade clinging to her arm, and looking up laughingly in her face, while she tells her tales of her home or continental life; almost proud to think that she has achieved this little victory over her evil passions, and ready to defy Satan or the world to tempt her to be jealous, or envious, or covetous again. When, as the women are gaily questioning and answering each other, they come suddenly upon Mr Auberon Slade. Ah! how much easier it is to be virtuous when all the occasions of temptation are put out of our way! Lady Gwynne, for the moment, almost regrets that she has permitted her new acquaintance to accompany her home. She would have Auberon Slade believe her to be everything that is most strong; but she dreads lest he should conceive it possible she could think lightly of their past! Mrs Slade, for her part, is first attracted by a sudden halt in her companion's footstep, and then an increased rapidity of motion, and looking up to ascertain the cause, catches sight of her husband's lithe figure as he makes his way to them across the ferns. And then it is her turn to hesitate and blush; but more, as it appears to Lady Gwynne, with timidity, than pleasure.

"Oh, here is Auberon! I wonder what he will say to see me with you? I hope he may not want me to go home with him! But if he does, I ought to, ought I not?"

"Undoubtedly—and any other time will do just as well for the Orchard House. How do you do, Mr Slade?" in rather a nervous manner. "I suppose you scarcely expected to meet Mrs Slade and myself together."

He removes his hat, and takes her proffered hand, but without speaking; and when he does so it is to his wife.

"You were going for a walk?"

"We were just going—that is, Lady Gwynne said I might go with her—but of course I will come back with you if you want me, Auberon," replies Mrs Slade, who from anxiety and agitation combined, has become one huge blush.

"Mrs Slade would say," interposes Gwendoline Gwynne, in answer to his look of mystified surprise, "that I was about to take her up to the Orchard House, and introduce her to all my belongings, if you have no need of her presence here. She has told me of your objection to her walking alone, but if you will spare her to me for an hour, I promise to send her back safely in my pony-chaise at the end of that time."

"Only too much honoured," he murmurs, as he switches off the tops of the basket ferns with his light cane; "that is, if you are certain she will not be intruding on your meal time."

"Oh, I hope I shan't intrude," cries little Mrs Slade, in a voice of alarm, "because if I shall, Lady Gwynne"——

"Make yourself easy,"—with a reassuring pressure on her arm—"you will give me pleasure by your company, at whatever time"——

"And you are certain you don't mind my going, Auberon?"

"I have already said so."

"But if you are not quite sure—if you would rather"——

"What do you think of Fernside, Lady Gwynne?" he interposes, without paying any further attention to his wife. She tells him her opinion, which is a very favourable one, and suggests a few easily effected improvements in the garden, and he seizes eagerly on the idea, and makes a note of it. After which, they move on again, he walking slowly by their side, but at the drive gate he stops, and raising his hat, bids the visitor good evening.

As he does so, his wife looks wistfully into his face.

"O Auberon! are you going back? I hoped—that is, I thought perhaps"——

She means to say (were she not so bashful of uttering an opinion) that she had hoped he would accompany them to the Orchard House, and at her words he halts, expecting, maybe, that Lady Gwynne will second the half-formed proposal—waiting, certainly, until she shall do so before he makes his own decision. But no such courteous acquiescence

issues from her lips; his presence only makes her feel her weakness more, and she has no desire for his company; so she stands, neutrally silent, with his wife clinging to her arm, and after a moment's brief scrutiny of her unbending features, he bows again, and turns away.

"You—you *won't* come, Auberon!" says Lottie, in a very disappointed voice.

"No, thank you, Lottie. I have other things to do! Don't forget that dinner is at seven." And turning on his heel, he leaves them, apparently to walk back to the house. But when the two figures have passed through the gates, and tread the dusty country road together, he creeps back furtively, almost guiltily, and concealing himself behind one of the posterns lest he should be seen, looks after them.

There they go,—so widely different to each other in mind and person and acquirements; and yet, in their devoted love, their tenderness, their dependence,—God save the mark!—upon himself, so wonderfully similar. She, the elder, for whom even now, let the world think what it may, he would shed the last drop of his blood,—with her graceful, upright form, her sombre garments, sweet, sad face, and earnest thrilling eyes: and by her side the girl, who, though ready to lay down her simple life for him, he feels so marvellously indifferent about, with her plump, ripe figure, blooming cheeks, wide open orbs, and parted lips—all fluttering robes, and gaily-coloured ribbons. What a contrast they present to one another! Auberon Slade gazes after their receding forms for a few moments, almost fiercely, and then as a turn in the road conceals them from his view, he stamps his foot, heaves a deep sigh, and with an oath half uttered, but fully meant, commences to retrace the path which they have trod together.

CHAPTER XXX.

"LET HIM SPEAK FOR HIMSELF."

THE very partial, and, in some instances, biassed opinions of Sir Lyster Gwynne, Mr Norris, Major Calvert, and others, on the subject of Auberon Slade's marriage, have been fully dis-

cussed in these pages; but the man's own feelings in the matter, his own thoughts, reasons, and ideas, have not even been inquired into, and it is time that he should come forward and tell them for himself. Gwendoline Gwynne, actuated (good as she is) by an unconscious jealousy, envy, and deep sense of her own loss, imagines that this marriage with Charlotte Cameron can only have been brought about by one cause—a want of faith towards herself; and that, in consequence, all that Auberon Slade said, and promised to her at Felton Hall, must have been false; that he either deceived her or his own heart, and can never have loved her, and desired to pass his whole life by her side and in her service, as he then thought (or at least said) that he did do. She thinks (with many others of her sex) that men regard marriage in the same light as she does—as a losing and a mixing of themselves, in and with another nature, until the two lives, whilst they exist, can never again be otherwise than identical. And to woman, marriage *is* (temporarily) such a loss of identity, which is the reason it so far oftener turns out unfortunately for her than for man; for there are but few creatures in this world, good enough, or strong enough, to guide themselves through its intricate mazes, far less to have another dependent on the twisting of their crooked will. But with men, marriage is quite a different affair; for they can either direct their wives or let them direct themselves; frequent their company, or leave them to their own devices; pay the hard tithe of attention duty demands, or lavishly bestow their whole affection; and on no one occasion are they called upon to yield up their own will to another, change their opinions, or alter their course of life, unless they wish to do so. Of course they have their preferences—who has not?—and there are instances on record in which they have found Memory a very troublesome appendage, and Regret a visitor that will not be shown the door. But what then? We may prefer Louis-Quatorze chairs, covered with red velvet and rich in gilding, whereon to repose our portly forms, but if we cannot procure them, we do not of necessity reject the more unassuming horse-hair. And Woman is to Man, as a necessary article of furniture, without which his house is not only incomplete, but quite uninhabitable. He *must* sit down. But it is not so with the weaker animal.

Call her spoilt, unreasonable, childish if we may, she will *not* eat bread and attempt to delude herself into the idea that it is cake; nor live on milk when she has tasted brandy. Man, deprived of his Louis-Quatorze, devotes, maybe, an occasional sigh to the memory of what "might have been," but reposes pretty contentedly on his horse-hair, nevertheless; but take away her cherished toy from a woman, and she will break anything else you may put into her hands. She is very like a great baby in this respect, it is true; but she knows how to love better than a man; and robbed of her natural rights, prefers to be desolate and alone, living on the dream of delights that were substantial although past, than exchange it for a present sham. This is truth, but Gwendoline Gwynne does not believe it; and very few women do. She thinks that if Auberon Slade makes any love at all to his wife, it must be exactly in the same manner, and with the same sensations, perhaps rather stronger ones, that he made love to herself; that there is but one way of bestowing a kiss upon a woman, or of looking in her eyes, or of saying that you adore her, and that since a husband can scarcely omit to pay such attentions to a newly-made wife, *she* must have been robbed of all her treasures before they could have been bestowed on Charlotte Cameron. But she argues falsely, for she begins with the mistake of supposing that Auberon Slade could not have married unless he had ceased to love her, whereas that very marriage was brought about solely from the excess of his uncontrollable passion for herself. Yet her wounded pride forbade her asking him the question as soon as it arose, and now—it is too late! He loved her—he loves her still—as fondly and truly as he said he did, and no woman will ever have the power to expunge her image from his heart. When he first went down to Felton Hall, his mind was filled with one idea—an admiration of, and desire to gratify himself; in fact, he was intensely selfish. But, day by day, this self-love had been expurgated by her example: her quiet, willing performance of unwelcome duties —her frank, but friendly counsel to himself. And thus he had grown to love her (Heaven only knew by what means), and found courage to tell her of the truth. Still, his love was selfish; had it not been so, he would have flown her presence sooner than discovered it; but it did not look so much

like love of self, and so he passed it over, as she did. Oh! the happy, happy days! innocent, compared to those which followed, in which he used to wander with her in the shrubbery at Felton, and draw out all the powers of her mind, and hear her murmur his own poetry, whilst each word fell like living fire on his heart. Oh! the mad, the guilty moment in which he made up his mind that he could not live without her, and destroyed the peace of hers—for nothing!

Auberon Slade had never been a seriously thinking man; but from the first hour that he poured the story of his guilty passion in the ear of Lady Gwynne, he *knew* that he was wrong; *knew* that he was risking her salvation with his own, and that the end of such a love could only be remorse and misery for both of them; and yet he persevered, trusting to her deep devotion to make her forget everything but him. But when she woke, as from a horrid dream of hell, and bade him leave her—and he went—the full force of what he had contemplated doing, seemed to break upon him all at once, and drive him frantic. He saw her and himself as they might have been—miserable, despised; for ever lost (in this world, if not the next)—and shuddered at the bare idea of what he had believed, but a few hours before, to be not only possible, but the best thing for both of them. And yet he felt the tide of his affection to be so strong, and his desire to possess her so unconquerable, that he believed that if they ever came together again (as in the course of events they probably would come), their destiny could not be averted for the second time. Unless, indeed, he placed a barrier between them evermore—a barrier which her pride would refuse to leap, though he made little of it—and when that barrier suddenly presented itself in the shape of Miss Cameron's unmistakable devotion, he fell into the innocent snare at once. Gwendoline was lost to him; it was all very well to say, "wait and hope, and be patient, and have faith in time," but it 's "ill work waiting for dead men's shoes," and Sir Lyster, in all probability, would survive himself. Yes! since he loved her too well to injure her—(and the facts of the case had really assumed this extraordinary transformation in the eyes of Auberon Slade; so ready are we to deceive ourselves)—the only thing that remained to him was to erase her image from his mind; and he could think of no better method for its accomplishment than by

taking another woman to his arms. He supposed that he must marry some day; all men of sense married after a certain age; and a bachelor's house is seldom the most tranquil spot in which to court the Muses; and why should not Charlotte Cameron do as well as anybody else? She had a very fair fortune; was healthy—or, at all events, she looked so—and devoted to himself. And a man should always marry the woman who *loves him*. It is the greatest mistake in the world, so Auberon Slade said, to marry the woman whom *he loves*, for, in the game of matrimony, the rules of "give" and "take" are never equal; and there is a French proverb which declares that in love, there is always one who kisses, and one who presents the cheek. And so he proposed, hurriedly, unadvisedly, almost unknowingly, and hoping against all hope, that the marriage ceremony once completed, his broken heart would heal up again, and the whole affair be finished for evermore. Oh, shortsighted and unreasoning. Why, when puppies are permitted to look about them in nine days, are we unhappy mortals kept blindfold to the end of ours? It was rather an untoward event, Lady Gwynne coming up to London before the final knot was tied; but matters were too far advanced by that time to be averted, and he tried to brave it out, and to persuade himself that the emotion caused him by her presence was an additional source of congratulation that he had been brave enough to place an insuperable obstacle between their ever meeting again, except as friends. Yet he suffered at that period, scarcely less keenly than she did; and what he felt when, on his wedding tour he received the intelligence of Sir Lyster's sudden death, I shall not attempt to picture,—there is no power in pen and ink to paint such agony! He remained on the continent for more than three months, longing, yet dreading, to return to England; and striving to drown the recollection of the fatal mistake he had made, by those headstrong and foolish means, which his friend, Major Calvert, was maliciously pleased to be able to relate of him. Then the advent of the season (at which he expected to be made as much of as he had been the season previously) allured him home, and he found to his exceeding chagrin, that Auberon Slade, who had published nothing for a twelvemonth past, and allied himself to a woman who was neither an heiress, a beauty, nor an aristo-

crat, was a very different person to Auberon Slade, the rising author of works still fresh in their readers' minds, and the *preux-chevalier* of Lady Mary St Maur. The fashionable world seemed to have forgotten him; he was no longer deluged with three-cornered notes and cards of invitation; few recognitions were accorded him, and no appointments made; even the Muses, fickle-minded females, appeared to have joined the general cabal, for he could neither read nor write, —and sickened and disgusted with the little attention he commanded, he resolved to cut London altogether, and live in the country. Most authors, who had made any name for themselves, possessed their country residences, to which they could retreat for the purposes of incubation; it was only natural to suppose that one could write better when quiet and undisturbed; and how was it possible that fanciful images of poetry and romance could be invoked amidst the traffic of omnibuses, the cries of street hawkers, and the mellifluous efforts of the German bands? And so Auberon Slade plunged into a library of those highly-flavoured works of fiction, the monthly registers of advertising house agents, and was soon busily employed wasting his strength, his time, and his money, in running half over England, to view places that were as utterly unlike the printed descriptions given of them, as the author of the description was unlike a man of truth!

He had no intention, when he commenced his travels, of finding his way down to Warmouth; on the contrary, it was a mere chance that took him there; but when the notice of Fernside (amongst several houses vacant in Dorset) was put into his hands, and he found that it lay close to the Orchard House, he could not resist the temptation of going down to see it, and have the chance of once more looking into *her* face, and holding *her* hand; of guessing, in fact, if Gwendoline Gwynne had borne the terrible calamity that his haste had brought upon them both, better or worse than he had done himself. And then,—the place suited him and he took it. He told himself at the time that he could not resist taking it. It was a weak, a foolish thing perhaps to do, but it was not a wicked one. The action was like the man. I do not claim for my hero any especial virtues; I am aware that he is weak and foolish and impetuous and unpersevering; but, hitherto, from whatever cause, he has not been wicked! Accredit him

with all the good you can. And for all his folly he is suffering a bitter retribution now, let Gwendoline Gwynne believe him to be as heartless as she may. He has settled down at Warmouth with the intention of leading an immaculate existence. He is going to read, and study, and write, until he has made his name as famous as *she* used to say he was capable of rendering it; and if he seeks her company, it shall be only for the purpose of benefiting by her clearer judgment of right and wrong; and drawing from her bright example of resignation, fresh strength wherewith to tread his weary way. Poor Auberon! how much harder you have made your task! What an increase of trouble you have piled upon your already overladen spirit! The remedy does not seem to work very well at present; he grows so hot and uncomfortable every time he sees a black dress (though it be even the washer-woman's) approaching in the distance, and a ring at the hall bell is apt to disturb him in his labours and put his choicest ideas to flight, whilst he wonders who the visitor may prove to be. But he attributes this unsettled condition to the sudden change effected in his mode of life, and persuades himself that when he is better used to meet her as of old, he shall feel more at ease in her presence. Only—he is so disappointed when the afternoons slip away one after another, and Lady Gwynne does not appear; and yet, when his wife receives the note to say the hour at which they may expect to see her, he sneaks into the grounds with his cigar, and does not reapproach the house until he imagines she has gone. Oh, mutability of human nature! Strange, deceptive state that revels in perplexing us! I think one of the most lowering proofs of our corruptible condition is the facility with which we lie to our own souls—and our own souls believe us! As Auberon Slade strolls back towards Fernside, he ponders on the interview just past, and the impression it has left upon him. But his mind (wearied with lingering on wrongs for which there is no remedy at hand), quits the beaten track of old regret, and dwells more on the present. He hardly knows if he is glad or sorry to see that Lady Gwynne has taken a fancy to his wife; it is true that he would have been annoyed had she disliked Lottie; but to make a friend and associate of her, to frequent her company perhaps more than she will his own—it seems so much as if she were taking up weapons for the other

side. *The other side!* what nonsense he is talking, as if there could be two sides now for Lottie and himself—Gwendoline is the one that must stand for ever upon the other side of the way! Heavens! what a sigh was that! it seems as though it gave the air a load to carry off with it, and caused the timid householders of the branching ferns to couch and pant hard, until the producer of such awful sounds had passed their hiding places by. It startles even himself, and his thoughts immediately quit the sublime, and descend to puerilities. He begins to wish she were not swathed in black; he hates the mockery of crape and bombazine; it is all a fudge, a huge humbug, and he wonders Gwendoline is not above succumbing to such a foolish fashion. And with her faintly tinted complexion (it used to be rosier, he thinks, at Felton) and serious cast of features, she really looks a mourner, and impresses one with the idea that she regrets the man's death—ha! ha! or his fortune; or has put herself in black for her own sins—or—or—*his!* Pshaw! he wishes that he had not thought of such a piece of folly! he shall never bear to look upon her funereal robes again.

"O Gwendoline! beloved, adored, and unforgotten! Would God that you had died in one of those dear moments when your head lay on my heart, and your heart believed me true!"

Could that unuttered cry have reached her where she stood, what joy—what rapture—what despair—would have filled her patient soul by turns!

CHAPTER XXXI.

A BRAVE RESOLVE.

MEANWHILE, Lady Gwynne and her young companion have quitted the dust-whitened road, and turned into the green fields which lead by a pleasanter, though more lengthy, way to the Orchard House, and the tongue of Mrs Auberon Slade, unloosed by the removal of her fear, is running glibly (an unprejudiced hearer might add, idiotically) on every topic which happens to enter the empty little receptacle which was prepared by Nature for the brain which never took possession

there. But Lady Gwynne, in her generous determination to make the best of Auberon's wife, passes over the foolishness, and only dwells upon the freshness of her conversation—a freshness which seems to impart new vigour to her own faded spirit. For it is for the first time. She is not yet tired of hearing the same remarks made over and over again, nor had the opportunity to observe that having once enjoyed the pleasure of Mrs Auberon Slade's society one must either forego the delights of conversation altogether, or submit to tread old ground until footsore. The girl prattles of Fernside; of her father's house; of her own likes and dislikes, in a school-girlish and uncertain manner; touching lightly on each subject as it comes beneath her notice, and never betraying by word or sign that her feelings have dived beneath the surface of any. Yet her new friend encourages her to talk, and especially as she shows no inclination to introduce the mention of her husband's name. Everything is giggled over by Mrs Auberon Slade in turn, except her love for him; and even her thoughtless little soul grows serious as it contemplates that sacred topic, and pauses as though it stood on holy ground. Her character for courage and strength of mind rather deteriorates in the eyes of Lady Gwynne, when she finds that she cannot pass a group of mild-eyed, milky mothers, browsing quietly beneath the spreading trees, and never even lifting their heads to survey the intruders on their domain, without giving vent to little shrieks of comic terror, and making momentary spasmodic clutches at the arm she clings to, until the awful animals are out of sight; nor conceal the renewal of her fear, when the two silky setters, with loving hazel glances, come crouching to their mistress's feet, not even daring in their timid joy to leap upon her until she shall have given them encouragement to do so.

"But then," as she charitably argues, "Mrs Slade is but a girl after all; only eighteen years last birthday; so much younger than myself; what can one expect from such a child? It would be almost as reasonable to demand that Daisy should never do or say anthing to grate upon a mind of larger growth and wider experience!"

Of course Mrs Auberon Slade falls into raptures over everything that is shown her at the Orchard House. People of her calibre always do. The garden, the greenhouse, the

dairy, the stable, and the pigsty; each one is more perfect than the other, and delights her better; and as for Daisy, and her donkey, and her family of kittens—no words can express the pity she feels for, and the interest she takes in, that "poor dear child" and everything that concerns her! But Miss Gwynne, strange to say, does not seem to return the feeling; and notwithstanding all her affection for her "dear Auberon," and the strong desire she has expressed to see his wife, looks suspiciously at her new acquaintance, and seldom answers, except to rebuff her. Lady Gwynne views this sudden alteration in her child's demeanour with pain, and tries to correct or cover it, by gentle interpositions of her own; but Mrs Auberon Slade does not appear to observe that there is anything amiss; and continues her string of compliments and condolences without intermission.

"What a charming child! What a beautiful complexion she has, and such a sweet expression. Auberon has so often told me about her! And such golden hair! Oh! you must let me kiss you again, Daisy. But she certainly does not resemble you in the face, Lady Gwynne."

"No! She has never been considered to do so."

"She is much more like her poor papa; he was *such a* fine-looking man. But I beg your pardon—perhaps I should not have mentioned his name—it was all so sad, so sudden"——

"Mentioning it will not make it more so, my dear," returns her hostess, with a melancholy smile.

"Ah! well, no!—perhaps not—but on the day of our wedding and all, you see—it seemed so dreadful! and I thought it was a shocking bad omen. I told Auberon so."

"Oh! you must not think that—omens are all nonsense," replies Lady Gwynne, though she has not much faith in her own words.

"Do you think so? Auberon says he knows of some that have come true!—and I know he thought it a bad thing for us; for he was so terribly cut up about it. For three days I hardly saw anything of him; and once when I went into his room without knocking, he"——

"Oh! stop, Mrs Slade—stop!" cries Lady Gwynne, suddenly—and then after a little pause, she adds, "do not let us speak of it any more!"

And Miss Ward, who is always indignant at the appearance

of any slight (supposed or otherwise) cast on her employer, says, with anything but a friendly glance towards the offender, that she only wishes she had had the courage to put her veto on such a subject being introduced amongst them at all.

"No, indeed, Miss Ward! it is no one's fault but my own," replies Lady Gwynne; and then, with a sweet look towards Mrs Slade, she continues: "You must not mind me, dear; I am all right again; only old memories are sometimes too much for me. Well, Daisy, my child, are you ready to go back into the house?"

"No, mamma; I shall not go back till you do," decides Miss Daisy, with an air of great protection.

"Oh, can you wheel about her carriage just as you like, indoors or out?" exclaims Mrs Slade, quite unabashed by the general confusion she has caused. "How very convenient; I never saw such a good contrivance before. Let me wheel you, Daisy—right round the garden, shall I?"

"No, thank you, Mrs Slade; I have Jack to wheel me; I require no one else."

"Mrs Slade would soon repent of her kind intentions, Daisy, wouldn't she? when she found how heavy you are," says her mother, cheerfully.

"Oh, I shouldn't think she was heavy; not a bit too heavy for me; let me try." And without further permission, Mrs Slade seizes the handles of the carriage in her hand; but a fretful cry from the invalid detains her.

"No, thank you; I don't want it! I said I didn't want it. Mamma, I wish to stay by you."

Mrs Auberon Slade drops the handle, and laughs—"Why, what are you afraid of—that I shall run away with you? But it is not a bit too much for me, Lady Gwynne; I shall often come up and give her a trundle. She must be lighter than she looks. How very tall she is for her age."

"I shall be as tall as mamma," replies Daisy, proudly. "I should hate to be short."

"Hush, Daisy," interposes Lady Gwynne, who is a head taller than her guest.

"So I should, mamma! I can't bear stumpy women; and no more can Auberon—he always said so."

"Mrs Slade, I have not yet shown you my bed of *immortelles*," exclaims Lady Gwynne, rising quickly from her seat,

and drawing her guest after her to the kitchen garden. "They are in their greatest beauty now; in another week they must be all gathered and stored away for Christmas."

They stand looking on the glorious array of violet and crimson and orange stars, together.

"They 're lovely!" says Mrs Auberon Slade. "I never saw such big ones in my life before. And you decorate the church with them at Christmas! How good of you to take so much trouble. Oh, I think it 's so nice to be High Church! I 'm very High Church myself. You see I always wear a cross. Papa doesn't approve of it; he considers it Popish; but, as I tell him, what difference can it make when it 's all exactly the same thing!"

"Do you think so?" replies Gwendoline Gwynne, thoughtfully, as she gazes on her *immortelles*, and muses on the unfading crowns reserved for those who are faithful and labour to the end.

"Well, I mean, excepting of course the music and the flowers, and the incense, and all that. And I think it is a great shame that people should quarrel about it in the way they do; for there can't be any harm in having the service made a little more cheerful for us,—it 's so very long; isn't it? Only I always manage to slip out after the sermon, for, whatever they may say, I can't see any good in stopping to see other people take the Sacrament—can you?"

"Yes, I can; but I have scarcely the time to tell you my reasons now," replies Lady Gwynne. Hearing the meaningless nonsense babbled at her side, she has had some thoughts of speaking on the mysteries of our most Holy Faith, but she represses the desire. This is neither the time nor place to introduce so solemn a discussion.

"I suppose, from what you say," she goes on presently, "that Mr Slade and you mean to attend Mr Barnes's church."

"*I* do, dear Lady Gwynne; of course I shall go to the same church as yourself; but I don't know about Auberon, for he has never been inside a church since we were married."

"Never been to church!" echoes her companion, with a vivid, quick remembrance of how regular he used to be in his attendance there when *she* led the way.

"I can assure you he has not; and I was quite ashamed of him sometimes abroad; but my mamma says it is no use

bothering about it, for these very clever men, poets and painters and such-like, are generally irreligious, and he 'll be all right when he gets old."

"God grant it!" rises silently from the other woman's soul, but she says nothing more upon the subject.

Here the sound of carriage wheels upon the drive warns Mrs Auberon Slade of the flight of time; and fearful of being late for the dinner-hour, she cannot be persuaded to stay a minute longer; and, after taking a most needlessly affectionate farewell of Lady Gwynne, and pressing several kisses (unresponded to) upon the cheek of Daisy, she leaves the Orchard House to its original repose. Then Gwendoline has leisure to turn round and ask her little girl what is the meaning of the extraordinary indifference with which she has received all the advances of their new acquaintance.

"My dear Daisy, I hardly knew you. You have always been so anxious to see Mrs Auberon Slade, and now when I bring her to the Orchard House, and she evinces every disposition to be very friendly, you positively repulse her. How is that? What would your friend Auberon say to it?"

"I 'm sure I don't know, mamma, but I don't like her; and I never shall like her; and I hope whenever Auberon comes here that he will leave her at home."

"O Daisy! as if it were likely! But why don't you like her? She is very pretty."

"I don't think so. Her hair is red, and so are her cheeks, —and she has such goggle eyes."

"You naughty child! You know you are saying what is not true. And she was very kind to you."

"I don't like her to be kind. I don't want everybody kissing me."

"You never seem to mind Mr Slade doing so."

"Oh, that 's quite a different thing, mamma! Besides she 's stupid."

There is no gainsaying this last statement; and for a few moments, silence is maintained between the mother and the child.

Then Lady Gwynne speaks—

"Daisy, darling, supposing all this to be true; still, you see, she and Mr Slade have come to be our neighbours; and if we wish to please him, we must be kind and friendly with his wife. Do you understand me?"

"But need we kiss her, or call her 'Lottie?' She told me to call her 'Lottie' this evening, when I had only spoken about six words to her."

Her mother smiles. "She is but a girl, Daisy—only eighteen. You must not expect her to be as wise as old Mrs Dawson, or old Lady Gwynne, though she is a married woman."

"O mamma! you are *not* old; you are quite young and beautiful; Miss Ward often says so; and much cleverer than Mrs Slade. Why did Auberon choose a stupid wife, mamma; he, who is so clever himself? How will she be able to write or read with him, as you used to do, or put all the commas and full stops into his manuscript? Do you remember how you used to do that for him at Felton, mamma?"

"Yes,—yes, child! Oh, he will teach her how to do it all, in time. But our tea is ready, Daisy; so we will leave discussing Mrs Slade for the present, and think a little of ourselves. Why, who made this delicious-looking cake? Miss Ward? You will wear out your fingers in our service, Miss Ward, if I do not take better care of you." And then she pushes all her own worries into the background, and makes the evening meal as cheerful as she usually does for her little daughter and her friend. But when Daisy has retired to bed, Lady Gwynne strolls down the garden by herself, thinking of the conversation that has passed between them. It seems hard to her (who has so generously taken up the cudgels in defence of her rival) that every one should turn against poor Charlotte Slade; even down to Daisy, who, childlike, is usually so innocently undiscriminating in the selection of her friends; and Miss Ward, whose dislike, though naturally unexpressed, is very evident. What has the girl done—so she hotly interrogates herself—that all the world, including her own husband, who has sworn to cherish and protect, should be against her? She married him, it is true; but there lies her worst crime, which, after all, is his; and it is a shame, that with all her youth and beauty, and apparently obliging disposition, she should find it so hard to make her way. But in this instance, Gwendoline Gwynne permits her Quixotic notions of what is due from her as a Christian towards her innocent opponent, to outstrip her better judgment. Charlotte Slade finds, and will find, a difficulty as she goes through life in making friends; not from what she has or has not, but simply from what *she is*, which is discernible enough to most eyes (even to

those of a child), and would be so to Lady Gwynne's were they not blinded by her womanly compassion for another's wrongs, and her holy desire to conceal a rival's failings. She is dull by nature, and frivolous from education; jealous and suspicious, and, where her suspicions are aroused, low minded; pleasant in temper when all around goes right, but sullen and difficult to appease when once annoyed. Yet, to set against these disagreeable traits in her character, Charlotte Slade is fresh, fair, enthusiastic in temperament, and generally too well satisfied with her own acts and condition to have any disposition to give way to temper. And the cordiality with which she has met the advances of Lady Gwynne (of whom, before encountering, she entertained an undefined jealousy, founded on she scarcely knew what) is due to the fact that, having a strong notion that there are cleverer people in the world than herself, and that the baronet's widow is one of them, she rejoices to find she is not considered unworthy of being admitted to her intimacy. Added to which, in her girlish, spaniel-like fashion, she really loves Auberon Slade, looks up to and reverences him as a faultless creature, infinitely superior to herself, and thinks that it will raise her in his estimation if he sees that Lady Gwynne (whose intellect he appears to rate so highly) makes much of the society she half begins to suspect he despises on his own account. It is some months ago since Lady Gwynne gave it forth as her opinion in the drawing-room at Felton Hall, that one might always judge of a woman's breeding from her hand, and temper from her mouth. Where is her judgment flown to now, that she forgets to criticise the rosy hands of Charlotte Slade, which, although small and dimpled, bear upon their untapering fingers and ill-shaped nails the certain impress of plebeian blood; or overlooks the coarseness of her jaw, which is the worst feature in her face, although at present the plumpness of her youthful cheeks and chin somewhat conceals the defect, which will yet be sufficiently apparent when a few years more have passed over her? Is the head of Gwendoline Gwynne quite turned in favour of this new acquaintance, that she will not see her faults herself, nor permit another to do so without blame? No; she is as clear of sight, as able of judgment, as discriminating of character as she ever was before; and did she seriously take her sense to task this night, would acknow-

ledge what she knows to be the truth, that Mrs Auberon Slade, in point of mental and physical qualifications, is far below the average of her friends, and quite unfit to be raised to the position of her intimate companion. But her compassion is so vast, her pity for all that probably lies before this girl so tender, her sense of how awful a destiny it must be for any woman to live with Auberon and not be loved by him so vivid, that she has no time to criticise. Charlotte may be—doubtless is—foolish, ignorant, and uninteresting upon close inspection, but that only proves the likelihood of her suspicion that her husband is already sick of her. And if she cares for him (as Major Calvert says she does, and her own manner seems to corroborate), had her rival been spitefully and vindictively and revengefully disposed, could she have desired the poor girl a more miserable prospect than stretches out before her? Auberon, so impatient of stupidity, so intolerant of ignorance, so full of false shame; if his sensibilities are often wounded, how soon he will retort on the unfortunate offender, and make her feel tenfold what she has inflicted on himself. And Gwendoline Gwynne fancies them dragging out the weary time together, the wife growing less pretty, less capable, and more distrustful of herself with each succeeding year; and the husband wearier, less hopeful, and more cold, until her kind eyes, that have almost ceased to weep for their own troubles, fill and run over at the picture she has drawn of her friends' probable disappointment. And with that a grand idea, a glorious hope, takes possession of her mind, which seizes on and hugs it eagerly, and turns it round in every position, until even to her sober judgment it seems feasible. She thanked God but a few weeks ago that the last link was not yet severed between Auberon Slade's life and her own, that it was still left to her, honourably and innocently, to mix some small portion of comfort in his daily cup; to make up, perhaps, for much that he might miss in his new home, and to remain, in some measure, the friend, and counsellor, and companion she had been before. And now she thanks Him over again, and for the same cause, though she no longer contemplates bringing it about by the same means. She *will* be Auberon's friend and comforter; but not by supplying what his wife lacks, excepting through herself. She knows that she is quick, and clever, and strong-minded above the generality

of women—he has often told her so—why should she not impart some of her strength and capability to Charlotte Slade; at all events, in that knowledge respecting literature, and manners, and society, which she evidently lacks, until, by her example and encouragement, she has rendered her what Auberon's wife should be—refined, and elegant, and fit to take the management of his domestic household!

Surely it cannot prove so very difficult! She is so young and impressionable, and has evidently taken such a fancy to herself; it will not be hard to lead her gently on from one thing to another, until she developes into an educated woman. Of course she will not alarm her by any disclosure of her plan, but by encouraging her intimacy at the Orchard House, by drawing out her opinions, giving a mild hint respecting that habit, or coaxing her to alter this, will by degrees accomplish the desired end, and reap her reward in Auberon's satisfaction. And then, perhaps, at some future time, not counted by weeks or months, but years and years hence, when both her hair and that of Auberon shall be grey, and she shall have been listening to his praises of his good, true wife, she may confide her little secret in his ear, and hear him thank her. And if, while she thinks of this, and portrays the perfect serenity with which, by that time, her lover will probably receive the intelligence of the efforts she has made on his behalf, the tears well freshly to her eyes, they do not rise there so much from regret for him, as that so beautiful a thing as Love should ever die! And she brushes them away so quickly, that not a trace remains upon her eyelids to tell they rested there. The boundary of her flower-garden (as has been said before) is a low wall which separates it from the little church; and inside this wall, fronted by shrubs, runs a turf terrace, which elevates its traverser far above it, and is a very pleasant path to saunter on and catch the sea-air, blowing straight across the cliffs. Lady Gwynne's heart has been beating fast beneath the excitement of her new idea, and her cheeks are hot and burning, and as she reaches the grassy terrace, she steps on it, and stands upright, with the breeze curling through her fair, soft hair and about her heated face. It is ten o'clock at night, but the harvest moon is shining brightly, and every surrounding object is distinctly visible, and the sudden apparition of Lady Gwynne as she springs upon the terrace pathway, startles

a man who, with a cigar in his mouth, has been leaning against the walls of the church, and apparently contemplating the windows of the Orchard House. Lady Gwynne sees the figure plainly, but she is not frightened; for, in the first place, she is not one of those delicate creatures who descry a robber in every bush; and in the second, has too much confidence in the well-known proximity of old Reuben and her dogs, to believe that any one in Warmouth would presume to think it possible to gain an entrance to the Orchard House. But it may be a vagrant in want of shelter, or a young prodigal unable to procure it, and she does not like to leave him without inquiring his need.

"What do you want?" she asks. "This ground is private property."

"I beg your pardon, Lady Gwynne! I trust I am not intruding," says a familiar voice; and Auberon Slade comes out of the shadow of the church walls, and stands bareheaded before her. She is so taken aback by the suddenness of his appearance, that for the first moment she cannot answer him.

"Mr Slade! What *are* you doing here?" she says at length.

"Committing a trespass, I suppose, though I had no idea of it! I thought the ground on which the church stands was free."

"Oh! so it is—of course—pray don't think twice of what I said! I imagined I was speaking to a vagrant, and they do break the shrubs and flowers so recklessly. What a lovely night!"

"Beautiful! I was strolling out with my cigar; and somehow I got into the fields, and found myself up here. You get such a splendid breeze on the top of this hill! But I had no idea I should startle the mistress of the property in this reckless manner."

"You did not startle me."

"Do you carry revolvers with you, when you stroll about at night in this warlike way alone? I must be more careful if you do."

"You need have no fears on that account," she replies, half laughing in spite of herself.

"I suppose you think a bullet through my wretched carcase would make but small difference to my happiness—and you are about right. Ah me!" and he sighs heavily, as he knocks

off the end of his cigar against the heel of his boot. But to this remark there is no answer.

"Does my smoke annoy you?" he says presently.

"Not at all! And especially as I am just going in. Good night!"

"Why do you go so soon? It is quite early; and I wanted so much to thank you for your kindness to my wife to-day!"

"It is nothing—pray don't mention it."

"But it is everything—*to me!*"

"Oh! I like her; no one could help liking her. I think she is a charming girl. I shall be very pleased to have her for a friend."

She says this, rather more hurriedly and nervously than she would have done, if she had had time to think about it; but he has come upon her too suddenly, and she wants to get away. She feels that she is not playing her part well. He sighs again heavily and makes no reply, which increases the awkwardness of the situation.

"I really must go, Mr Slade. I cannot stay a moment longer. Good night!"

And before he has time to remonstrate a second time, she has disappeared, and left him to himself. But why is he there at all? Why should he leave the grounds of Fernside, from which he can have easy access to the seashore, to wander half a mile along the dusty road, and up the toilsome hill which leads to her abode, for the flimsy object of catching the salt breeze. This is the question which disturbs the brain of Gwendoline Gwynne, as she returns to her own home; and which is not settled long after she enters it. And then those sighs. How she wishes that he would not sigh so deeply! What creatures of circumstance we are! Somehow, as she prepares herself for rest that night, the idea of moulding and training the character of Charlotte Slade, until she shall have made it lovely in her husband's eyes, and worthy to eclipse the remembrance of her own, does not appear quite so delightful a prospect to my heroine as it had done before.

CHAPTER XXXII.

PUT INTO PRACTICE.

But the evening doubt is not permitted to bias the morning resolution, for the evil spirit seldom gains ascendancy in the heart of Gwendoline Gwynne for long; she prays too often and too fervently. She rises with the firm determination to to put her brave resolve in practice, and less disposed to sympathise with than to blame Auberon Slade for leaving his own home, which he might make so pleasant if he chose, to wander about the grounds of other people.

"So foolish!" she says, frowningly, to herself; "and so unnecessary! As if one part of a place were not as good as another to smoke a cigar in, and the air the same all over Warmouth. And what can that poor child think of his leaving her alone, in that bearish manner, to spend the evenings by herself? It is heartless of him."

So virtuously indignant is Lady Gwynne over the unfortunate bridegroom's criminal indulgence in a solitary stroll by moonlight, that one would imagine she were the most *exigéante* of women herself. And yet, she would have made this man, the most patient, indulgent, self-sacrificing of wives, seeing his faults only through her desire to amend them, and loving him steadfastly in spite of them all. But to judge him as *her* husband, and the husband of Charlotte Cameron, are two very different judgments in the eyes of Lady Gwynne. And so, by the morning's light, he stands condemned. She keeps wondering, as she flits between the dairy and the kitchen (for she is a woman who can accommodate herself to any circumstances, and having settled down to a quiet country life, is charmed to have a finger in every domestic pie), whether she shall be able to induce Mrs Auberon Slade to spend a morning occasionally with her and to take an interest in the details of her household management, which, for the sake of the good she can do with her money, she conducts as economically as possible. That would be a beginning, at all events, and might lead to grand conclusions. For keeping

house, if one's heart is in it, is, after all, as pleasant a business as any other, and by no means to be despised, as beneath the notice of an intellectual mind, for this plain reason, that no fool can do it well. Men are apt to imagine that *any* woman can keep house for them; they are also very apt to live to be undeceived. But Gwendoline Gwynne has quite made up her mind on one point, that, in pursuance of the object which she has in view, she must seize every opportunity of mixing in the society of Mrs Slade, and of gaining her entire confidence. She is quite sure of this—and yet, when during the course of the morning, a note in Charlotte's very irregular and ill-formed writing, is put into her hand, and she finds it is a cordial request that she will dine at Fernside on the following day, her immediate impulse is to decline the invitation. To sit at Auberon's table—as Auberon's guest—with his wife doing the honours of the house to her—oh! the idea is odious; she cannot entertain it for a moment. It is an ordeal she could not consent to undergo. She remembers, with a sharp stinging pain, how, in the bygone Felton days, Auberon Slade used to love to tease her, by prophecies of the grand marriage he was to make at some future time, and fanciful descriptions of the mansion in which he should receive her as a guest, and the beautiful and accomplished woman who would preside at the head of his dinner-table. Until he caused a burning flush of vexation to surmount her cheek and bright tears to fill her eyes, and had to swear a thousand times over, that, if he went down single to his grave, no woman, nor money, should ever tempt him to forget the love she bore him, before she could feel satisfied or even calm again. And she had declared, on one of those occasions, with all the old impetuosity of that changeable disposition which had rendered her so loveable and charming in his eyes, that if he ever forgot the promises he had made to her, she would never cross his threshold, nor stoop to be entertained by any woman, however beautiful or accomplished, who filled the position of his wife. She remembers all this now—the time, the place, the situation—too vividly for her present peace of mind, and decides that she cannot dine at Fernside, and she has a dozen feasible excuses for not doing so. So she sits down hurriedly, and transcribes the answer, in which she pleads her inability to accept Mrs Slade's kind invitation, on the various scores of

delicate health, of never dining out, nor giving dinners at home, and of the constant attention needed by her little girl; and then despatches the note, and returns to her occupation, a little flushed, perhaps, from the excitement of recalling old times, and arguing against her inclinations, and not quite certain whether she may not have thrown cold water on the new-born friendship she is so desirous to cultivate. But she has scarcely risen from her mid-day meal, when she is informed that Mrs Auberon Slade is waiting to see her in the drawing-room; and the reception she encounters from her on entering is proof sufficient without words that no offence has been given or received by the resolution of the morning. Charlotte casts herself into her new friend's arms, as though she had not met her for a twelvemonth..

"Dearest Lady Gwynne, you must come to-morrow; we can take no refusal; and I have toiled through the sun all this way on purpose to tell you so."

"My dear girl! it is very good of you; but you must excuse me. I never go out anywhere; I am not even in the possession of an evening dress."

"But we shall be quite alone, Auberon and myself. We know no one but you to ask; and it is so stupid there sometimes, you can't think!"

"I am afraid I should not render your evening a very lively one; and I never leave Daisy, except for a walk or drive."

"She has Miss Ward with her; and you can come home as early as you like."

"I wish you wouldn't press me, Lottie; you make it so hard to refuse."

"But why need you refuse, when I want you to come so much? It will be so nice to spend a long evening together, and I want to consult you about so many things in the house."

She hesitates. Here is the very opening she has determined to seek after placed in her hand? Will she be justified, in consideration of her own inclinations, her own feelings, her own false shame, to refuse to embrace it? Will this be putting into practice her resolve to bear all things, and brave all things, in order to render Auberon's wife a more suitable companion for himself? What is it that rises up to prevent her acceptance of this invitation,—is it charity, patience,

pardon, or is it pride? She asks the question in good faith, and her conscience answers for her.

"Well, then, my dear!"—yet even now a little hesitatingly —"if you really desire it so much, I will come; but only on this condition,—that the invitation is not to be repeated. I used to be very fond of society, Lottie, and parties, and every amusement of that sort, but I am getting past them now, and like best to see my friends at home. You can come to the Orchard House whenever you feel inclined to do so—either morning or evening—I shall always be happy and pleased to see you; but you must not ask me to dine out, or mix in any gaiety of that kind again, or my other neighbours will expect me to do the same; and then I shall be giving them offence."

"Oh no, dear Lady Gwynne! of course not; you shall do just as you like, only I wish that you could dine with us every day. It is so good of you to come, and Auberon will be so delighted; and I hope you will bring some music, I want so much to hear you sing, and—oh! is that Daisy just come out upon the lawn? I must run and give the dear child a kiss—she is the most charming creature I ever saw."

Lady Gwynne replies that she thinks her little girl is going out for her afternoon ramble to the seashore, accompanied by Miss Ward. And then Mrs Auberon Slade discovers that it will be the most delightful thing in the world for her to walk back to the village by the side of Daisy's carriage; and she only wishes the dear child could be persuaded to return with her to Fernside, and bring back a bunch of those yellow roses which Lady Gwynne was admiring so much the other day; which, when Miss Daisy understands for what purpose her company is required, she graciously consents to do; and Lady Gwynne hears Mrs Slade's voice holding high converse with the child to the very bottom of the Orchard House lane, when, somewhat to her relief, notwithstanding her high principled resolutions of reform, she finds herself once more alone. Well, she has what is commonly called "let herself in for it," and so she is too sensible to worry needlessly about the question, but tries to banish it altogether from her mind, until at the appointed hour on the following day, her fat, lazy pony drags her indolently up the drive that leads to Fernside. She feels rather then as though she wishes that she had not come, but it is too late for repentance; so, casting her plain bonnet and

shawl upon the hall table, she puts a good face upon the matter, and walks boldly into the drawing-room. But she need not have been so bold, for although the time of meeting has fully arrived, there is no one present to receive her; and when, after a few minutes of suspense, the door opens, it is to admit Auberon Slade instead of his wife. This is what she has dreaded most in accepting the invitation; that bad management, or want of etiquette, will be the cause of throwing her alone with him, the person, of all others, she is anxious to avoid. But Auberon Slade does not look at all dangerous on the present occasion; on the contrary, he is ruffled, nervous, and unlike himself.

"I am so sorry that you should be kept waiting in this manner," he commences, in a tone of vexation; "but of course Lottie is not ready—she never is."

"It is not of the slightest consequence," replies Lady Gwynne, with a polite smile of reassurance.

"I consider it of all the consequence in the world," he returns, bluntly; "but you might as well speak to the table as to some women."

"What a very pretty look-out you have here," she says, as she turns to the window with a view to turning the conversation.

"Do you think so?" discontentedly.

"Every one must think so. You are lucky in possessing so much old timber about the place. It is invaluable, because no money can buy it. I really think you should have a few deer here. They would look so nice amongst those trees."

"Who is there to look at them?"

"Why, yourself, of course," with a bad attempt at a laugh, "and your friends. Besides, they would inspire you."

"*Inspire me!* I fancy it would take a great deal to inspire me now. My own belief is, that I shall never do anything again."

"Oh, you mustn't say that," earnestly. "Your life is all before you—it is but just beginning; you have plenty of time."

"Time is of little use, when the stuff is wanting."

"The stuff, as you call it, will come by and by. Wait till you see the autumn glories settle down upon the Warmouth woods and dells, and you will find inspiration pouring back upon you quick enough."

"Hum! Well, we shall see; but for my part, *je m'en doute.*"

"You are not a fair judge. You have not yet settled down to your new life."

"No, nor ever shall!" she hears him mutter, just as his wife, radiant in white muslin and red ribbons, rushes into the room.

"Oh, I am so sorry, dear Lady Gwynne, I am so grieved to be late, but I had quite forgotten to tell my maid what I intended to wear, and everything is at sixes and sevens still, and she could not lay her hands upon my dress. And how are you—quite well?—and dear Daisy! I wanted so much to go up to the Orchard House and inquire after you all to-day, but I had a letter to write to dear mamma, and that took the best part of the morning, and then Auberon was afraid I might intrude upon your dinner-hour."

"Considering you wished to pay your visit exactly at two o'clock, I certainly was," grumbles Auberon, from the other end of the apartment.

"And home duties should always come first," says Lady Gwynne, who, with an inborn aversion to any public demonstrations of affection, is doing all she can with decency to detach herself from the clinging embraces of her young friend.

"Here, Lottie!" exclaims Mr Slade, impatiently, observing the action; "now that you *have* come down, can't you see about our having dinner? It it already half-an-hour past the time."

"Oh yes, dear—of course. I dare say it is ready," meekly answers Mrs Slade, as she rings the bell, and asks the question of the servant. The dinner *is* ready—has been so from the hour it was first ordered, and is, consequently, more than half spoiled, when a few minutes later they sit down to its discussion. Added to which, it is a badly appointed dinner, betraying want of taste and ignorance of management in the selection of most of its dishes; and Auberon Slade, who is a perfect epicure on the subject of food, and very fidgety with regard to etiquette, loses his temper more and more as each succeeding course makes its appearance, and is thoroughly sulky by the time the last one has disappeared. His disappointment and ill-humour are so apparent, and Lady

Gwynne's efforts to distract attention from them so unavailing, that poor little Mrs Slade becomes not only nervous but alarmed; and when at the conclusion of the repast, after an ominous silence of ten or twelve minutes, her husband asks her abruptly if she intends to remain there all night before she conducts their guests back into the drawing-room, she rises hastily from the table, and finding herself once more alone with Lady Gwynne, bursts into tears of genuine vexation.

"Oh, I *am* so sorry! he is so awfully angry with me, though I'm sure I don't know what I've done to make him so. Was the dinner so very wrong, Lady Gwynne? I took such pains with it. I thought there would be plenty for every one."

Lady Gwynne, recalling the boiled leg of mutton that appeared at the top of the table and the roast shoulder at the bottom, flanked by a beefsteak pudding on one side and a dish of chops upon the other, cannot help smiling at the girl's remark; but it is a smile of genuine kindliness. This is a case in which she can fully sympathise, for she is sure that the young wife has done her best; and thinks the husband's ingratitude but a poor return for all her trouble. And as she takes her in her arms and kisses her, she whispers very comfortable words into her ear.

"And so there was plenty, my dear girl, and everything very good of its kind; but these things want a little management; and a lighter dish or two would have relieved the appearance of the table. However, one cannot be expected to know everything at once; and I daresay you have never been used to order dinner at home."

"Oh no! my mamma always does that."

"Of course; and it is not so easy as people think. I was only sixteen when I married, Lottie, and you would laugh to hear what funny mistakes I made at first."

"*You!*" with an upward glance of surprise. "Did you ever make mistakes, Lady Gwynne?"

"My dear! why should I not? I was still more ignorant than yourself, for I had never known what it was to have a mother."

"Oh! I wish you would tell Auberon that."

"But why? It would scarcely interest him."

"Because he thinks you are so awfully clever, you could never do anything wrong."

There is a touch of jealousy in the tone with which these words are uttered; and Lady Gwynne's quick ear perceives it, and she answers very gravely—

"My dear, you are entirely mistaken. No one could know me so long as Mr Slade has done without being acquainted with my numerous faults. But I had been a housekeeper for many years before I met him, thanks to the kindness of an old lady, Mrs Jackson by name, who took me under her maternal wing when I first went to Felton, and taught me all kinds of little things in the way of management, which I never should have found out for myself."

"Ah! there is no Mrs Jackson here to teach me," exclaims Mrs Slade, mournfully. "I wish I had never left my dear mamma."

"*I* will teach you, Lottie," interposes the kind voice of Lady Gwynne; "that is, if you will let me do so. I will show you all I know, and put you up to my little tricks, and make you as good a housekeeper as myself, if you think that will content Mr Slade."

"*You* will? O Lady Gwynne! how very kind of you! But I am afraid it will be so much trouble, and you will find me such a stupid one to learn."

"I don't think so; but at all events we will try, and, if you will come up to the Orchard House to-morrow morning, directly after breakfast, we will settle all about the day's dinner together. And I will show you my books, Lottie, and explain to you the method on which I go; and you will soon say you had no idea it was so easy."

Mrs Slade dries her eyes, and listens eagerly.

"You see Auberon is always regretting the French dishes, and how is one to get them here?"

"You have a good cook, and will be able to procure most of them, if you only let her know the names."

"Ah! there's the difficulty"—(with a deep sigh)—"I forget the names, and I never could pronounce them properly."

"Never mind! The next time we are alone together, you shall describe the dishes to me, and I will see if I cannot remember them. We lived on French cookery at Felton.

But here comes Mr Slade; don't let him see your tears; they will annoy him!"

"Oh! I have no handkerchief. I must have dropped it in the dining-room. I will run and fetch another;" and once more she leaves Gwendoline Gwynne standing by herself, at the very moment that she most needs the support of her presence.

Auberon Slade, playing with one of the delicate little cigarettes, which she so well recalls he always used after the dinners at Felton, comes sauntering round by the window, which opens to the ground, and peeps into the empty room.

"What! has Lottie left you to yourself again, Lady Gwynne? I *never* knew a girl so totally unconscious of the requirements of society. You must let me apologise for her."

"Pray don't take the trouble. Your wife and I get on very well together—we perfectly understand each other. She has only left the room for a moment!"

"You are very good to say so. Perhaps you don't think the dinner needs any excuse to be made for it, either?"

"I think it was a very good plain dinner. You are too fastidious; you must remember we are not at Mivarts'."

"No! nor at Buckingham Palace. There are daily reasons against my forgetting either fact."

Then she feels she *must* speak; it is not a pleasant task to have to plead with this man for forbearance towards his wife, but common charity forbids that she should longer hold her tongue.

"Oh, don't be hard upon her, Mr Slade. Remember how young and inexperienced she is. You expect far too much."

"Is it too much to expect to have decent meals, decently put upon the table?" he answers, gloomily.

"Perhaps not—but it will all come in time. The error lies, in supposing that so young a girl, fresh from her mother's care, could have the experience of an old housekeeper."

"Her mother might have taught her better."

"But no mothers do so teach their daughters now-a-days; it is a well-known fact, each woman has to earn her own experience. And Mrs Slade is so teachable, and anxious to do right, that it will not be long before she acquires hers."

"It's all very fine talking," he grumbles on, as he leans

against the window post, with his cigarette between his lips, and his soft languid eyes fixed on the evening sky, "but when a man marries, he generally expects to find a little extra comfort at home, in exchange for the horrors of domestic slavery."

He looks so determined not to be pleased, so ready for one of the reproofs she used to administer at Felton when his naughty fits came on him, that were it not for the sadness which has risen up between them, to check everything like mirth when they are together, she could find it in her heart to administer a good scolding to him now.

"Men are generally very extravagant in their expectations," she answers, gently, "and defeat their own ends by being so. Oh, take my advice, Mr Slade (you know I could only offer it for your happiness), and be more patient with her. She is very much attached to you, and your annoyance wounds her deeply."

"Has it wounded her?"

"Of course it has—she ran away to hide her tears—and after all you know, she has done her best."

"Poor little Lottie! well, I suppose she had, but bad's the best; that's all I can say for it."

"Then you must teach her better."

"That's what I'm trying to do, only you don't seem to approve of it."

"It is not of the action I disapprove; it is of the manner. Take care, lest in securing her greater anxiety respecting your comfort, you do not destroy something which is of far greater value."

"And that is"——

"Her affection."

He puffs away in silence, and no other remark passes between them, until Lottie has crept back into the room again, and taken up her station in the dusk beside Lady Gwynne.

"Well, Lottie," says the latter, cheerfully, as soon as she perceives her entrance, "do you feel inclined for a stroll? Shall we go out and help Mr Slade to finish his cigar?" and as they step into the garden, and he joins them, she is pleased to see him take his wife's hand, and draw it through his arm, and pat it kindly as it lies there, whilst the evidently unusual notice calls up a bright flush of gratitude into the girl's

blooming cheeks. She grows hilarious in her spirits then, as boisterous as she was before depressed, and her triumph is at its culmination, when Lady Gwynne discovers that the evening has slipped away, and it is time for her return, and Auberon proposes that she shall dismiss her pony-chaise, and let them escort her home. And when they have done so, she sees them turn to leave the Orchard House again, still arm in arm, with Lottie's bright face beaming back upon her, without a sigh—without a regret that it should be so—for the deepest pain that Auberon Slade could now inflict on her, would be the pain of thinking him so utterly unworthy as to visit his own disappointment on the head of the simple creature he has made his wife.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE MUFFIN WORRY.

THERE *are* people in the world who can laugh one moment and cry the next, love and unlove, and forget that they have done either in the course of a few months, and Charlotte Slade is one of these people. All her emotions are exhibited by extremes, yet none of them reach much beneath the surface, and it is doubtful whether even her affection for her husband (the strongest her frivolous heart has ever experienced) would survive the pressure of poverty, or disgrace, or any serious suspicion. The result, consequently, of Lady Gwynne's kind intentions on her behalf, and cordial invitation to the Orchard House, becomes very distressing to Lady Gwynne herself, although no outward token betrays it is so. Hers is *not* a demonstrative nature, especially with her own sex, although she is always kind, and courteous, and forbearing. She cannot understand the violent friendships entertained by women for each other; nor sympathise with the secret confidences, and the fervent kisses, with which those charming creatures occasionally strive to excite the envy of their male acquaintances. Gwendoline Gwynne has never made what is termed a "bosom-friend" of any woman in her life, and in extending the right hand of fellowship on so short knowledge to the wife of Auberon Slade, has stepped considerably out of her way.

She has done it for *his* sake, not for hers, as all the world might see, however much her own heart may deny it; a little, too, in order to satisfy the tender conscience that reproaches her with having thought ill of the girl before they had met face to face. She perceives all Lottie's faults most plainly—indeed, they are so evident that no one could avoid perceiving them; and under other circumstances, it is probable that her first meeting with her would have been her last. But Lady Gwynne is undergoing a self-inflicted penance; she knows that her past errors have been owing to an undue indulgence of her own will, and she will crush that will by every means in her power now. The society of Mrs Auberon Slade is distasteful to her in many ways; for that very reason she will endure it. Her conversation is foolish, and at times sickening; yet she will not only listen, but force herself to respond. Her confidence, with regard to her husband and herself, is, above all others, the greatest trial that Lady Gwynne could be called upon at the present moment to undergo; but still she listens to it, and gives her quiet, womanly advice in answer, and friendly counsel. And the opportunities for thus purging the self-indulgence of the past, by the self-denial of the present, come on her fast and thick. In giving Mrs Slade that cordial invitation to come up to the Orchard House whenever she felt so disposed, Gwendoline Gwynne hardly knew for how much waste of time she was making herself responsible, for thence-forward she is there not only every day, but almost all day long. Hardly has breakfast been completed, and Daisy settled on the schoolroom sofa with Miss Ward and her books, before the voice of Lottie Slade will be heard, loudly demanding admittance at the window, and if refused, which after several wasted mornings, becomes, for the child's sake, imperatively necessary, she walks off in search of Lady Gwynne, and does not quit her side for the remainder of the day. No one wants her at Fernside—so she generally avers, with a sad, drawn mouth that excites the other's pity; Auberon has gone off fishing, or cricketing, or shooting, somewhere in the neighbourhood, and will not be home till dinner-time; and the house is so abominably stupid, and she does not know what on earth to do with herself. But she never lacks a welcome at the hands of Lady Gwynne. However busy, or oppressed, or sad she may be found, she manages to lay aside the work,

or shake off the dulness at the approach of Charlotte Slade, and to be all that she has promised to her—a monitor and friend. She always tries to improve the occasion, by urging Auberon's wife to work, or study, or employment of some kind, but generally without success, for notwithstanding all her complaints over her own shortcomings, and lamentations that she has been taught no better, and that her husband finds fault with everything she does, Mrs Auberon Slade continues as indolent, as uninformed, and as bad a manager as before. In vain does Lady Gwynne attempt to drill her into habits of method and punctuality, to improve her taste, and to reform her manners. Charlotte cries one moment and giggles the next, and continues to spell her name with the four letters, FOOL; and it is no less annoying to her friend to find all her efforts thrown away, than to be compelled to spend hour after hour, listening to her puerile and frivolous conversation, and knowing at the close of it that the girl is as little benefited as herself. Yet, though she frequents the Orchard House only to talk, and not to learn, all hints that its inmates would survive the occasional loss of her society are thrown away on Charlotte Slade. She has conceived the violent and overpowering fondness of an empty-headed girl for Lady Gwynne, and neglected by her husband, is never happy out of her presence. Everything that she says or does must now be regulated by the advice and opinion of this new acquaintance, and she hardly writes a letter or decides upon the fashion of a dress, without first running up to ask what Lady Gwynne thinks of it.

"My dear Lottie," Gwendoline will say on these occasions, "you really must learn to be guided by your own taste. I shall not always be at your side, remember, to decide whether pink or green will go best with lavender. And I am sure that no one would be better able to direct your mind in these matters than your husband. I always considered his taste to be very good, and he has a right to have a voice in the ordering of your dress. Why don't you consult him?"

"Oh, dear Lady Gwynne, I never could! He would only say it was hideous, like the rest of my dresses. He says I have no taste at all, and perhaps I haven't. But yours is so perfect—do advise me."

"Well if you will have it so, I say that it should neither

be pink nor green. Trim the lavender dress with black, or else with silk of its own shade."

Charlotte looks terribly disappointed.

"What, *all* lavender? Won't that be very dull—so Quakerish-like; and I want rather a stylish costume, you know!"

"Then why not follow your own inclinations? It is of little consequence to any one but yourself! But when you ask my advice, of course I must give it."

"Well, now, I wonder which will look best."

"Why don't you try both, Lottie?" impudently cries Miss Daisy, who has as little respect for Mrs Auberon Slade as for one of her kittens.

"Oh no, dear," replies the other, quite seriously. "That would be too smart. Would mauve look better, do you think, Lady Gwynne?"

"I have already given you my opinion, dear. I have no other."

"Well! it's very provoking. I suppose, after all, I must let my maid decide for me."

The consequence of which decision is, that Mrs Slade sails up to church on the following Sunday in a lavender silk dress, profusely decorated with emerald green velvet; and feeling rather disposed to settle herself in her seat before her friends from the Orchard House come in. At length Lady Gwynne considers it incumbent on her to extend some sort of invitation to the Slades, in return for that boiled leg of mutton and beefsteak pudding, on which she was so hospitably entertained at Fernside. She has put off the ordeal as long as she possibly can; for the few interviews she has held with Auberon since his marriage, have so visibly upset the equanimity of both of them, that she dreads proposing anything that may bring about a similar result. Yet she cannot avoid, at some time, asking them to her house; and as Lottie has given her more than one broad hint lately, that she has a great desire to spend an evening there, she resolves to defer doing so no longer. But she will not invite them to dinner; in the first place, because she has done so to none of her neighbours, and, the rule once broken, could no more be strictly adhered to; and, in the second, because she hopes that the idea of an early tea, will so disgust the fastidious taste of

the master of Fernside, that he will permit his wife to come without him. In which opinion, Lottie seems fully to coincide.

"Oh, dear Lady Gwynne! *I* shall be delighted, of course, if Auberon will only let me come; but you know what he is; he never touches tea; and I have often heard him say, he would rather go without food at all than take his dinner early."

"I know that, Lottie. I have heard him say the same myself; and I am sorry that I cannot break through my rule on his account! But he will understand how I am situated. You are not my only neighbours. I have received hospitality from several quarters at Warmouth; but I have never given a late dinner to any one, nor dined out, until that evening when you persuaded me to go to Fernside. If I do it once, I must do it always! And I am quite contented with the quiet country life I lead here, and very unwilling to propose anything that shall seem like a desire to mix in society again."

"Oh! of course, dear Lady Gwynne! I quite understand—being a widow, and all that; and so suddenly as it occurred too! Well, you will not be offended if Auberon does not come, will you, nor think him rude, or negligent, or anything? Because he has a very high opinion of you. I know it quite well—and of anything you may think fit to do; only, he hates tea, and is rather particular about having his cigars; in fact, I don't think he would give up his cigars for any one in the world—and so"——

"My dear Lottie! I am quite aware of that. You must tell Mr Slade exactly what I told you; but add from me, that should he change his mind upon the day appointed, or feel disposed to stake his hopes of dinner on a venture, he shall find enough to eat here. I promise that."

She says so—feeling that in mere politeness, she can scarcely promise less—though firmly believing at the time, there is no chance that she will see him. Mrs Slade laughs, as though carrying the message were a perfect jest.

"Oh! I will tell him, of course; but you mustn't prepare anything, Lady Gwynne, for he will never come!"

"I shall make no preparations, Lottie, but what are necessary for my other friends, and I shall expect *you* any way. The day after to-morrow, at seven. Don't forget!"

And then she invites Mr Barnes, as a set-off against the

petticoats of Miss Ward and herself (Emily Musgrave having long left her to return home), and Mr and Mrs Delamere, two very kind friends of hers, who live a short way out of Warmouth; and on the very afternoon who should opportunely ride in from Leymouth, but Major Calvert, on whom she pounces eagerly, and declares her prisoner (not unwillingly on his part) for the day.

"You are the very article I wanted," she says, laughingly, "for here I have a grand 'muffin worry' coming off this evening, and only two men to support me through it."

"And who are they?"

"Mr Barnes and Mr Delamere. I am sure you will like them both."

"All right! I 'm your man!" exclaims the Major, who looks relieved to hear the names of the expected visitors, and in another minute, his horse being taken from him, and led round to the stable, he is peremptorily ordered into the garden, to pick flowers, and select fruit, for the coming "worry," and afterwards, under the directions of his hostess, to arrange them in their respective vases and dishes, at which trials of skill he proves himself to be very useless, hopelessly awkward, and excessively penitent, by turns. But when the table is laid out for tea, it repays their trouble, and the Major ascribes more than half the effect to his own exertions.

"Quite like a supper," he decides, admiringly; "couldn't we get up a carpet hop after the 'worry,' Lady Gwynne?" And the soft laugh with which she receives his proposition of a "hop" in her little drawing-room, with old Mr Delamere, himself, and the parson, for partners, is more like the light laughter he listened to at Felton than any he has since heard issue from her lips.

The tea-table is certainly a subject for admiration, and it is no wonder that, after a ten mile canter along the sea-shore, the hungry Major praises it. Raised pies from Exeter, and covered *patés*, that excite expectation; with cold game, and blushing lobsters, mingle in such a manner, with dainty salads, home-made cakes, crisp biscuits, clotted cream and fruit, as to disgust no palate, however particular, nor turn an appetite, however blunted. The tea and coffee cups are on the side-board; iced water, claret, and such light wines are placed within the reach of all; whilst over everything is shed, like

the richly scented flowers that intersperse each dish, an odour of refinement and good taste recognisable by the lowest intellect. But if the feast is elegant, the mistress of it is still more so, and Major Calvert cannot take his eyes off her figure, as, clad in her sweeping mourning raiment (the cap of which is the only symbol of her widowhood she has discarded), she moves through the rooms appointed to receive her guests with as much thought and care (not only for their comfort, but the indulgence of their taste) as though she were expecting the advent of crowned heads. And he thinks, what a different aspect his comfortless bachelor quarters would assume, if such a presiding genius reigned simultaneously over them and him. Seven o'clock strikes—the Delameres have arrived, so has Mr Barnes; they wait for no one but Mrs Auberon Slade.

"A good little creature," Lady Gwynne whispers in confidence to Major Calvert; "and I like her very much, just as you said I should—but she is not always very punctual in keeping her engagements."

However, before the quarter strikes, she is actually announced, and on her heels, looking rather sheepish, and decidedly out of place comes—Auberon Slade!

"Only fancy!" exclaims Mrs Slade to her hostess, after she has recognised Major Calvert, and most awkwardly acknowledged (if acknowledged at all), the introduction afforded her by Lady Gwynne to the rest of the assembly, "Auberon *would* come, though I told him all you said, and that it was only a tea-party. And he has always declared that he hates tea so."

"Then we will try if we can find him something better than tea to drink in return for his complaisance," replies Lady Gwynne, smiling, though she is scarcely easy to see him there. "Mr Slade, you know Major Calvert; what a lucky chance it is that has brought you together this evening."

And to judge from the scowl that immediately overspreads the face of Major Calvert and the unmistakable curl of Auberon Slade's nose, they seem to regard it as a very lucky chance indeed. The "muffin worry" proceeds triumphantly; Major Calvert and Mrs Slade placed fortunately at opposite sides of the table, lay aside, in the presence of more solemn duties, their mysterious feud, and, to judge from the excellent appetites they display, find nothing to regret in the sacrifice they have made to friendship in giving up their dinner. Every one talks,

and eats, and appears at his ease, and it is not until the meal is concluded, and the party re-assembled in the drawing-room (where Miss Daisy, stretched out upon the sofa, is ready to receive them), that anything occurs to make Lady Gwynne repent that she has brought her old Felton friends in contact with each other. The child is, as usual, delighted to meet Auberon Slade (whose scanty visits to the Orchard House have often been made the subject of her lamentations); and she calls him to her side, and makes him sit upon the sofa, where they indulge in little whispered confidences together, and kisses, stolen behind the shelter of her palm, which excite much merriment on the part of the spectators. And Major Calvert takes that opportunity to draw near Lady Gwynne.

"I was not aware that you expected Slade this evening."

"I did not expect him. His wife told me positively that he would not come; but he was included in the invitation."

"I am sorry I did not know it."

She looks up surprised.

"Are you not friends, then?"

"I would just as soon not meet him, and of all places—*here*."

She colours at the insinuation, and her answer is given coldly."

"I regret if I have been the means of drawing you into anything unpleasant; but I do not perceive how your objection to meeting Mr Slade can carry more force with it in one place than another."

"That is, Lady Gwynne, because you cannot (or you *will* not) read my heart."

She has read it, or its intentions, some weeks before, but the perusal has not proved sufficiently interesting to permit her to encourage him to open the book further.

"I have no desire to search into any heart, Major Calvert, that contains ill-will towards my friends. Mrs Slade is an intimate visitor here, and no one who comes to see me can avoid the risk of meeting either her husband or herself. All my acquaintances have the alternative of course, but I should be sorry to see you exercise it. We have been friends too long and too cordially for me to contemplate the probability of your desertion without regret."

She speaks so kindly, yet so decidedly, that he cannot

mistake her meaning. She has no intention of shutting her doors against Auberon Slade: those who visit her must shake hands with him—in other words, she loves him still! and Major Calvert listens, and sighs deeply.

"I understand you, Lady Gwynne, and will say no more upon the subject, except to express a hope that I have not offended you."

She assures him he has not, but he only looks half satisfied as he steals into the garden after Mrs Slade, who, as usual, when in the presence of her husband, talks very little, and has lost all her buoyancy of spirit. In another minute Gwendoline finds that Auberon, seizing advantage of the Major's absence, has deserted Daisy, and taken up his station by her side. The party have mostly strolled into the garden by this time, and are dispersed among the flower-beds; Miss Ward is holding an animated discussion with her pupil on the advisability of her being carried off to bed; and for all the listeners that are interested in hearing what they have to say to one another, Lady Gwynne and Auberon Slade might be alone.

"What is that fellow Calvert doing here?" he demands, rather roughly, as a preliminary to their conversation.

"*That fellow Calvert*, Mr Slade! Are you speaking of my friend, Major Calvert?"

"You know I am."

"I suppose he is '*doing*' much what you are doing yourself—conferring an honour and a pleasure upon me."

"I mean, what is he doing at Warmouth?—what brings him down here? His regiment is stationed at Aldershott."

"I believe it is, but his mother and sisters are stationed at Leymouth; and there is such a thing as officers occasionally getting leave for the purpose of visiting their families."

"He doesn't appear to give his family much of his society."

"He is staying with them."

"But he is here every day."

"Is he? I was not aware of that."

"Well, Lottie met him here last week, and the day before yesterday, and he was in church with you two Sundays ago."

"Yes?" interrogatively.

"And it must be very unpleasant for you to have a great hulking fellow like that always hanging about you. I wonder you don't give him his *congé*. He must bore you horribly."

"Oh! I can assure you he does not. Major Calvert is a very old friend of mine, and I have a great regard for him and all his family. He is thoroughly kind, and honest, and true, and there is no one I would sooner see at the Orchard House than himself. He is always welcome here."

Her hearer can scarcely conceal his annoyance.

"Oh, well, of course, please yourself; it is of no consequence to me."

She is ready to cry, she feels so pained, yet still she answers stoutly—

"I never supposed it was. Shall we go into the garden? Your wife will think we are lost if we don't join her," and stepping out upon the lawn, she puts an end to the conversation. But the hardest trial of her composure is when they all re-enter the sitting-room, and Mrs Auberon Slade becomes clamorous that she shall sing them a song; and Daisy (poor innocent Daisy, always making mischief without intending it) joins in the conspiracy against her.

"Now, *dear* Lady Gwynne," cries Lottie (Lottie mouths her title so, that Gwendoline Gwynne is sometimes sick of her own name), "you *must* sing us a song, for you know that I have never heard you, and Auberon says you sing so charmingly."

"Yes, *do*, mamma," urges Daisy; "it is such an age since you have touched the piano. I should so like to hear you again, and so would Auberon—wouldn't you, Auberon?"

But Lady Gwynne only looks conscious, and stammers out some excuse of not having any music, and not having practised for so long a time, for the truth is, she has never raised her voice in song since the day it bid all hope depart from her with the love of Auberon Slade, and she does not believe that she shall ever sing again.

"O mamma darling! that's nonsense!" exclaims Daisy, in her anxiety to make matters easier; "because you used to sing all your songs without music, and you have some that have never been written down. You have one that you composed yourself, mamma,—that Auberon wrote the words for—don't you remember it, Auberon? that one that you used to be so fond of; that begins, 'Oh, love! my own,' and which you wrote for mamma on the back of a letter one Tuesday afternoon when we were all sitting under the walnut trees together."

Lady Gwynne's face is scarlet, far more so than the occasion seems to demand; and she is quite unable to trust her voice in answer. But she is saved from the pain of hearing Auberon Slade's reply, by the renewed entreaties of her friends.

"We have so often heard of your music, Lady Gwynne," says Mrs Delamere, "yet never had an opportunity of enjoying it. I am sure, if the effort will really not be too much for you, that it would give us all infinite pleasure."

"Oh, and she sings so beautifully too, Mrs Delamere," interposes that wretched Daisy, with all a child's eagerness to praise its mother. "She used to sit at the piano all day sometimes and sing to Auberon and me (you know you used, mamma), but she won't sing now. She has never sung nor done anything jolly since we were at Felton"—in a voice of despondency.

"Hush, my dear!" says Mrs Delamere, "no, of course not—very natural." And then Major Calvert improves the occasion by observing, "I can answer for what Lady Gwynne's powers *used* to be, and cannot believe that they will fail her now. It is all amongst old friends, Lady Gwynne. Will you not indulge us?"

Major Calvert and the Delameres are regarding her fixedly in the face, Auberon Slade has turned away to the window, and Lottie (or it seems so, to her heated fancy) is looking jealously after her husband, and suspiciously towards herself. She feels baited, beset, like an animal driven to bay, and as though she could no longer refuse without betraying the secrets of her heart. Her countenance is flushed and anxious; but finding all her excuses put on one side, and her pleas of inability disregarded, she turns suddenly and almost desperately towards the piano, sits down, and strikes an opening chord. But with the first touch of the familiar instrument so long untouched—with the first hearing of those notes so long unheard—all the old associations of the past rush back upon her mind, like a flood that will not be restrained; and once more she sees *him* bending over her, and confirming with each look of his eyes the truth of the words his hand has written. Oh, if she dies for it, she cannot sing before him! She tries to do it; her parched lips open, but emit no sound; and after one or two vain attempts to satisfy her friends, she rises from

the piano with a face as white as death, and saying,—"You *must* excuse me, it is of no use trying, I cannot do it," staggers from the room. Then they are all excitement and conjecture, and Daisy is wild to be carried to her mother, but before Miss Ward has had time to follow her, she is among them all again.

"My dear friends, there is not the least occasion for your alarm. It is very foolish of me not to be able to do as you desire me, but I am not strong. Daisy, my darling, have I frightened you. I shall have become more brave before we have another 'muffin worry.'"

She laughs off their suspicions lightly, until they feel satisfied that what she says is true, and no reason but physical debility is to be assigned for her failure; all, that is to say, but the one heart that understands her own. And he steals to her side (literally steals, so guilty does he feel, both in the action and the cause that prompts it) as she stands, some minutes later, in the moon-lighted window, and holds converse with her dumbly; for she knows that he is there, although she neither turns to nor addresses him. The drawing-room is being illuminated, and wine and light refreshments handed round, and such of the company as have hearts, without being disagreeably conscious of the fact, are busily engaged in helping themselves and one another; whilst a German band (for German bands, as they pass from place to place, do find their way occasionally even down to Warmouth) is playing, "Then you 'll remember me," and not unsweetly, in the valley just below (I feel this is a hazardous assertion, and open to criticism, but still maintain that there *are* German bands, though few and far between, whose harmony is not all discord). Emboldened by the sounds within and without, he presumes at last to speak to her.

"Is it possible that you really cannot sing? Don't give me the pain of feeling that I have silenced that voice to which it used to be my greatest happiness to listen."

She tries to say he is mistaken, but the falsehood dies upon her lips.

"Gwendoline, speak to me!"

He has hardly pronounced the words before his wife's voice comes between them.

"Lady Gwynne, won't you have some fruit or some cakes? some of these little plum cakes, they are so nice! and I am

sure a glass of wine would do you good. You don't eat and drink enough; you hardly ate anything at tea time, for I was watching you." And roused to a sense of what she owes her visitors, Gwendoline Gwynne returns to the centre of the lighted apartment, and does not again quit it until they have separated for the night.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A SLIP OF THE TONGUE.

A MONTH has passed away, a ruddy month, during which those autumn glories, of which Gwendoline Gwynne spoke to Auberon Slade, have settled down upon the woods and dells of Warmouth, and it is once more September.

"A note from Fernside, my lady," says the parlour-maid of the Orchard House, as she presents a twisted scroll of paper to her mistress.

Lady Gwynne looks up languidly from the writing on which she is engaged, and takes the note and lays it beside her on the table. She is too busy to inspect it now; is far too sad at having to perform the task that lies before her to have any heart to do so: for the letter she is composing is in answer to one received that day from Major Calvert, in which he asked her to become his wife. It is so hard to read the generous, manly, straightforward terms, in which he makes his offer; to remember all his kindness in the past; to think upon his handsome face, and figure, and warm heart; and yet to have no better words in which to thank him for it all, than those which, in the same breath, carry a denial of his hopes.

"My objections to your letter," so she writes, "arise from none of the causes you anticipate. I am not inclined to quarrel with you for being either presumptuous or premature, for you know my past history, and I, your present worth. But still it gave me the deepest pain to read your proposal, for the simple reason that I cannot for a moment entertain it. Do not think hardly of me, my dear friend, nor attempt to shake my resolution, which is founded on nothing

connected with yourself; but, *I shall never marry again*, and therefore it will be inflicting useless torture upon both of us to re-approach the subject. At the same time, you know what trouble it would give me to lose your friendship, which has been so sure and steady hitherto. What shall I say? Hope I cannot give you, and yet I am so unwilling we should part. Act then according to your judgment as to our meeting again, but regard this letter as my final answer, and believe that my heart can never waver in the sincere regard it has always held for you."

She reads this over two or three times, as though considering whether she can, by any possibility, make it sound less harsh, but failing to descry the means, heaves a deep sigh, and hastily placing the paper in an envelope, directs, and sends it to the post. And then she has time to remember Mrs Slade's neglected scrawl, for an answer to which, the servant informs her, that a man is waiting. How different a specimen it is to the other.

"DEAREST LADY GWYNNE,—Will you drive with me to-day to Torbridge? If so, I will call for you at three. The new horses go beautifully, and the carriage is so easy; but Auberon has gone somewhere shooting, and he has asked the Delameres and several others to dine here to-morrow, and there is no beef in the village, and the cook says she must have beef. And so I am going to fetch it, and I hate to drive alone. Do come, there's a dear, and the man will wait for an answer.—Your loving LOTTIE."

Lady Gwynne does not take long to make up her mind. The day is close and sultry, and she has a slight headache, and a suspicious redness about the corners of her eyes; and a drive to Torbridge in an open carriage is, above all other things, the one most likely to do her good. So she scribbles the words, "Yes, with pleasure," on a scrap of paper, and sends the messenger home again at once. The pleasure of her anticipation is much augmented by the fact that Lottie's husband is well out of the way, and not likely to interrupt their *tête-à-tête*. She is as good friends with Mrs Auberon Slade as ever—indeed, more so, if the frequency of the girl's visits to the Orchard House may be quoted as a proof; but

Auberon's conduct has, more than once of late, given her needless pain, and she has already begun to consider the expediency of going with Daisy to spend a few months with Sir Lyster's uncle, Mr Hassell, who has often since his nephew's death entreated the widow and her daughter to become the guests of his quiet home in Sussex. Only a few days before she had been compelled to speak to Auberon about his coming up so constantly in the evenings without his wife to smoke his cigar in the verandah of the Orchard House; and it had been the more unpleasant for her to do so, because the man had so often met other gentlemen of her acquaintance there. But for *him*—under all the circumstances of the case—and considering that he had already made Lottie slightly suspicious of him on her account—it was not right; it was inconsiderate, unfeeling; she thought all this, although she did not say so. Yet, even the slight hint she gave him was but ill received. She could see that, by the extremely courteous way in which he bowed, and thanked her for the trouble she had taken, and assured her she should have no reason to repeat it. And then walked homeward, forgetting to say good-night to Daisy, whose extreme affection for her friend Auberon, was one of the reasons which made it doubly hard for her mother to say anything that should place a barrier between their intimacy. Hard for herself, too, as Heaven might witness; but she knows it is her duty, and tries to rest upon that knowledge. However, for to-day there is no chance of meeting him, and consequently Lady Gwynne can anticipate her drive to Torbridge with complete composure. At three o'clock, true (for a wonder) to her time, comes Mrs Auberon Slade, but, the fact is, that her destination lies ten miles away; and whatever other advantages she has refused to profit by, something, or some one, has very vividly impressed upon her mind the absolute necessity of never being late for dinner. The carriage and the horses are fresh purchases from London, which their owners have not used above a time or two, and Lady Gwynne is earnest in her admiration of both of them, whilst Lottie, listening, lies back upon the new cushions with a look of entire satisfaction. She has gained the desire of her heart; there is not another barouche and pair of horses in the village.

"Yes, they're nice, aren't they?" she replies, glowing with

pride. "Mr Delamere said yesterday that the horses are a great deal too handsome for Warmouth, and that these steep hills will pull their legs to pieces in no time. But Auberon declares it is all nonsense, that he would rather I drove no horses at all than bad ones, and that when these are worn out he shall sell them and get others."

"You are fortunate in having a husband so well able and disposed to gratify your tastes, Lottie. This is certainly a most charming carriage, and I wish I could afford to keep just such another. It puts me in mind of the one we used to have at Felton. But the horse on this side goes rather wildly, doesn't he?"

"They are not quite used to each other yet, I suppose," replies Mrs Slade, who has not the slightest knowledge of horses or their ways.

"Were they broken in for Mr Slade?"

"Well—I don't know, I really didn't inquire; but I believe they belonged to a duchess, so they ought to be good ones. Why, my goodness! here is Auberon!"

The coachman pulls up, and Mr Auberon Slade, who is on horseback, after lifting his hat to Lady Gwynne, takes no more notice of the inmates of the carriage, he is so busily employed in the examination of his new purchases.

"That off-horse goes lame, Johnson," he observes to the coachman, after a critical survey.

"Beg your pardon, sir, he doesn't, it's only his manner. He'll run easier after a bit."

"Nonsense! I saw him give from the shoulder. Drive on for a few yards."

The order is obeyed, whilst the owner of the animals, bending to his saddle bows to observe their action, canters by the side. Five minute pass, and the carriage is pulled up again.

"I believe you're right, Johnson, but the brute has no notion of trotting. Why do you let him bear to the right in that way?"

"He'll go better after a little, sir; he's fresh this afternoon. He'll come home very different to this."

"By Jove! he shall go different too, if I have any power to make him do so. Here, James," to his groom, "take the horses back to Fernside, I am going to make these brutes listen to reason," saying which, he dismounts, and appearing

for the first time to remember the presence of his wife, comes round to the carriage-door.

"Where do you want to go to, Lottie?"

"Oh, we were going—but of course it isn't of any consequence—oh yes, it is, though, because of the beef; but still, if you would rather go anywhere else, you know, Auberon—"

"Where were you bound for when I met you? Can't you answer a plain question without beating about the bush in that way?"

"We were going to Torbridge, Mr Slade, on an expedition to the butcher," replies Lady Gwynne.

"Thanks," with a very formal bow in the direction of her figure; "I shall have the honour, then, of driving you there."

"But, Auberon, I don't understand," says Lottie, with wide-open eyes, "I thought you were gone out shooting for the day."

"Well, then, you can employ your mighty intellect between this and Torbridge in trying to comprehend the stupendous fact that I have changed my mind again," he answers, as he climbs the carriage-box and takes the reins from the hands of the unwilling Johnson.

It is a very different pace they go at now to what the steady coachman has been driving them. Something or other appears to have ruffled the sublime equality of Mr Slade's temper, for he lashes the unfortunate horses under his control, till their young fiery blood rises to boiling heat, and with tossing heads, extended nostrils, and foam-bespattered flanks, they make the trees, hedges, and herds of cattle fly past them like a whirlwind.

"How famously we are going now," remarks Lottie, with a complacent smile; "how nice and fast dear Auberon is driving us!"

"A great deal *too* fast, in my opinion," replies Lady Gwynne, who, noting the fixed look in Johnson's countenance, and the horses' rapidly increasing pace, has turned rather pale.

"Do you think so?" returns Mrs Slade; "but perhaps you don't care about going fast! Now, in my idea, there is nothing to be compared to a good rattle through the park; it always seems to me——Ah! my goodness!—Auberon! save us! Oh, my! where *are* you going to?" which latter excla-

mations on poor Lottie's part, are extorted by the rude fact that the off-horse has shied violently at the trunk of a tree, turned the new carriage over on the highway, and propelled both the driver and his servant to the ground. They are more surprised than hurt, having been simply tumbled into a muddy ditch; but the accident sobers Auberon in a moment, and quick as lightning he is up again, helping Johnson to loose the struggling animals, and right the vehicle. But a cry from his wife arrests him.

"O Auberon! Lady Gwynne! Oh, look at Lady Gwynne! She is dead—you have killed her!"

He had caught a glimpse of Lottie thrown off the perpendicular, but evidently unhurt, and had fully imagined her companion was the same. But now, as he rushes to their assistance, he finds that the carriage, in tilting to one side, has thrown out Gwendoline upon the thicket, where she lies pallid and unconscious. In an instant he has pulled out his wife, anyhow, in any way, and having planted her upon the ground, returns to the rescue of her friend—and his. He lifts her with the greatest trouble; it is no light task to drag a well-grown woman over a prostrate carriage, and contrives, somehow, the perspiration pouring down his face the while, to convey her to the road. But she is pale as death, and quite insensible; her head falls feebly back on his extended arm; he puts his hand upon her breast, and searches eagerly for the beating of her heart. He cannot feel it: he almost believes, with Lottie, that her soul is flown.

"Gwendoline, dearest! my love! my life, wake up!" he cries, passionately, though in a frightened whisper, as he gazes on her closed eyes and leaden-coloured lips. But Lottie, in her own alarm, is standing close beside him, *and she hears the words.* There are two men to look after the carriage and the horses, and they summon help from a neighbouring field, so that by the time that Gwendoline's grey eyes open to the light again (for she has only been partially stunned) they are able to re-enter the carriage, and slowly retrace the road to Warmouth. But Auberon Slade is no more their driver; he sits on the back seat of the carriage, deeply anxious, humbly remorseful, and only desirous of one thing, that they may reach the Orchard House in safety.

"Lady Gwynne, dare I hope for your forgiveness? I shall never forgive myself."

"Pray don't mention it, Mr Slade; accidents will happen, and we shall have forgotten it by to-morrow. Is it not so, Lottie?"

She places her hand affectionately in that of her young companion as she speaks, but Mrs Slade withdraws her own. She is not likely to forget the drive to Torbridge for many days to come.

CHAPTER XXXV.

BY THE SAD SEA WAVES.

It is some little while after the carriage accident, before Gwendoline Gwynne recrosses the threshold of the Orchard House. Although the danger was not imminent, the concussion and the fright prove sufficient to have seriously deranged her nervous system, and for several days (very unlike her own bright, active self) she lies upon the sofa, or droops in an arm-chair, apparently quite indifferent to what goes on around her. When once more able to rouse herself, and resume her ordinary duties, she is not surprised to hear that Auberon Slade has called almost every day and left a card of inquiry for her health—a man who has endangered the life of his friend could scarcely do less—but totally ignorant of the scene that took place during the period of her brief unconsciousness, she is puzzled to imagine why Lottie has not been to see her. Lottie, in general so overpowering by reason of her expressions of unalterable attachment, and her desire to extract a similar sentiment from the lips of Lady Gwynne; one would have thought she would have been the first to fly to her side in time of sickness, and exhibit some proof of the devotion she so constantly insists upon. But she has not even called to ask how she is; and at first Gwendoline thinks little of the omission, for her husband has been, therefore she must have received intelligence of her well doing, and the loss of Lottie's society is personally a great boon to her languid self. Indeed, she scarcely knows how, in an interval of so much weariness and consequent depression, she should have been able to endure it.

But when a week and ten days have elapsed, and Mrs Auberon Slade has not yet made her appearance, Lady Gwynne begins to fear that she also must have suffered from the rough handling which they mutually experienced.

"I am really afraid that Mrs Slade cannot be well," she remarks to Miss Ward; "it is so very unusual for her to let more than a week elapse without coming to the Orchard House."

"It is not illness that prevents her, Lady Gwynne, for Daisy and I met her yesterday in the village, and she looked as blooming as ever."

"Really! What did she say?"

"She spoke to Daisy for a minute, something regarding a little white dog which she had with her, I believe; but the interview was not long. You know the child never much cares about the company of Mrs Slade."

"But did she not speak of me—inquire after me?"

"I do not think so, at all events I did not hear her, though I was standing close by all the while. But it is not often that Mrs Slade honours *me* with her notice."

"How very strange! I cannot understand it. I wonder if anything has happened to offend her? I must go to Fernside this afternoon and see."

"Dear Lady Gwynne, you are not fit to go out yet."

"Oh yes, I am; and I could not rest until I have solved this mystery. Please order the pony-chaise to come round directly after dinner, Miss Ward; I must try and catch her before she goes out for her afternoon drive."

Yet, notwithstanding her assertions to the contrary, Gwendoline Gwynne, taking her seat in the pony-carriage, feels almost too weak and languid to hold the reins. It is a sultry day towards the end of September; the hot sun pours down upon her head through the slight covering afforded by her crape-bound hat; she feels more than once as though she cannot go through the task appointed her. Yet still she perseveres; she does not love Lottie, but she believes that Lottie loves her, and that fact is of itself sufficient to appeal to the soft heart of Lady Gwynne. Should she by any means have offended the girl, or hurt her feelings (and although Gwendoline's own conscience is no help in aiding her to find a cause, it suggests that Auberon's conduct may have given her one), it is her duty to try and remove the fancied injury

or argue it away. The affection Lottie bears to her demands so much at her hands. But should she discover her surmise to be correct (and her surmise goes no further than the notion that Mrs Slade may have been foolish enough to turn sulky at her husband's frequent visits to the Orchard House), Lady Gwynne resolves on one thing: that she will at once put matters in train for paying that promised visit to the Hassells. It is very annoying and inconvenient to leave Warmouth just at that moment—annoying, because the autumn flowers are in all their beauty, and she has a thousand little plans for next year's garden to carry into execution; and inconvenient, because Miss Ward has no desire to return home, and she cannot take her to a friend's house for an indefinite period. But if it must be so, it must. Lady Gwynne has no idea of trifling with anything so sacred as a wife's fears, however silly and unfounded they may be; and at any trouble and expense, she will leave Mr and Mrs Slade to themselves for a few months, to see if the removal of her presence, and the undisturbed enjoyment of each other's company, may not serve to put their matrimonial matters on a better footing. Her mind is full of this topic from the moment that she quits the Orchard House, and it is seething with it as she enters the drawing-room at Fernside, which is, as usual, empty. At first she almost fears that she shall find a difficulty in obtaining an interview with the mistress of the house, for one message is sent down after the other; first to say that Mrs Slade is busily engaged, and next that she is just going out, and can see no one; but Lady Gwynne stands firm to her ground, and her final answer, that she has come on business of importance, and that if Mrs Slade is not ready to receive her, she will wait until she is, has the desired effect, and in another minute Lottie, looking very red and very puffy, enters the apartment.

"How do you do, my dear?" says Lady Gwynne, in her usual voice, as she advances to meet her.

Her perfect equanimity appears rather to disturb the other's presence of mind (if Lottie's mind is ever present), and almost before she knows it, she has shaken hands with her.

"And is this *all?*" demands Gwendoline Gwynne, as she steadily scrutinises her rival's changing countenance, "and after a separation of ten days, Lottie? We have been at our

wits' ends to discover what had become of you. Have you been ill, my dear, or too busy to come up as usual? This is the first time I have gone out since the occasion of that unlucky drive to Torbridge, or I should have been here before. Did you feel any bad consequences yourself from the fright?"

They are still standing together where they met, in the centre of the room, and their hands yet lie in one another's, for Lady Gwynne has clasped a firm hold over Lottie's plump palm, and the girl has not sufficient courage to draw it peremptorily away. But her eyes are downcast, and her colour comes and goes. She is feeling perhaps as strongly as many a clever woman feels, but there are no words in that empty head wherewith to tell the emotions that are torturing her, and so she suffers, and is silent. But patience, it is only fear and *gaucherie* that keep her for awhile from expressing what she feels.

"No answer, Lottie?" continues Lady Gwynne, sorrowfully, after a pause, during which the other has carefully avoided meeting her eyes. "What have I done to deserve this altered treatment at your hands? If I have offended you, let me hear in what way, and I know that I shall be able to convince you it was unintentional."

But all the answer she receives is conveyed by the sudden wrenching of her companion's hand from hers, and the departure of Mrs Auberon Slade to take possession of an arm-chair at the further end of the apartment, whence silently and sulkily, she gazes on the beds of bright flowers that lie before the window. Thither, after the lapse of a few moments, Gwendoline Gwynne pursues her, and kneels by her side.

"Lottie, dear girl! *do* tell me what have I done? in what have I failed as a friend towards you?"

"I don't wish to speak to you," replies Mrs Slade, with a look of injuiry.

"But *why*, for *what?* Am I not even to know the cause?"

"You know it well enough!"

A flush of consciousness does irradiate the face of Lady Gwynne, as she listens to these words, but still her voice is steady.

"I do *not* know what cause I have given *you* to turn against me; but if you have your suspicions, I wish to know them

that they may be removed. Had I not been a true and honest friend to you, Lottie, ever since the commencement of our acquaintance, I should not dare now to look you in the face, and beg you to tell me all."

"Who asked you to be my friend?" exclaims the girl, with sudden vulgar passion. "Who wanted to go up to your stupid house, or eat your nasty luncheons? *I* didn't! You invited me there, and if I had only known all I know now"——

"What do you know now?" demands the widow, calmly.

But the girl is silent; her cowardice is as conspicuous as her coarseness. She cannot be brave and honest at the same time.

"I know that I invited you to the Orchard House," continues Lady Gwynne; "that I gave you a frank, free, cordial invitation there, and I do not think you can accuse me of ever having neglected to extend as hearty a welcome. But I did it for your own good, not mine."

"I don't believe it!"

"If so, I do not suppose that any arguments on my part will make you believe it, Lottie! But, at all events, you will admit that when a young, inexperienced girl like yourself associates intimately with a woman of my age, the benefit that accrues is likely to be more on her side, than mine."

"I don't see that. You asked me for your own purposes, and I—I *hate* you!"

"O Lottie!" and there is no need for the failing, reproachful voice to utter more.

"*I do!* and I don't care if all the world hears it. What did I want with your advice about clothes, and dinners, and all that rubbish? Going on at me, as you did, in your double-faced manner, and pretending that it was only for my good, and all the time it was for Auberon and not for me! *There!* I know so much!" with a vindictive look towards her pale, calm rival.

"Well, Lottie, and if it were? Suppose I have no desire to deny it? Your husband was my friend long before yourself, and if I perceived that your girlish inexperience (which, as God is my witness, I have always made the best of in his eyes) was likely to prove a source of misery and discontent between you, to which of you did I do wrong in my attempt

to remove it? What object could I have in view in doing so, except the hope to make you dearer and more necessary to him?"

"Oh, of course, you may say so now! but it is of no use trying to blind me any longer. I know it all; I have told Auberon so, and he says that I am right!"

At this information, Gwendoline Gwynne rises to her feet.

"He says that you are right? Right in what? Explain yourself, Lottie, I *insist upon it!*"

Her impressive manner has the desired effect.

"Right in believing that he is in love with you, and always has been! I don't care if he tears my eyes out for telling you so, and I wish to goodness I had died before I had ever met him!" and Lottie's grand bravery resolves itself into tears. But her companion does not cry, although the blow strikes even deeper on her heart.

"O Lottie! Lottie! I *am* so sorry! I wish, too, that I had died before I met him or you! I wish I could wipe out this injury with my blood!"

"It 's all very fine to say so now," sobs the offended wife, "but you ought never to have stayed in the same place with us. I suspected all this long ago, when I found a lot of his trumpery poetry addressed 'To G——,' and with last year's dates upon them. And when I taxed him with it, all he said was, that I was 'deuced lucky' to get him at all, love or no love. As if that would satisfy a woman. And the other day I became sure of it."

"What other day? Oh, tell me all!"

"The day of the accident, when you fainted, and I *heard* him call you 'Gwendoline,' and his '*life*,' and his '*love*,' and all kinds of nonsensical folly, that a man with any pretensions to cleverness should have been ashamed of. He never said anything like that to me."

Lady Gwynne turns very white, and staggers backward.

"It was heartless of him!" she gasps; "oh! worse than heartless—infamous!"

"*You* say so?" demands Lottie, lifting her swollen eyelids with astonishment.

"*I* say so?" repeats Lady Gwynne, steadily; "of course I do. Who should have a better right to say so than myself? Listen to me, Lottie."

"No! no! I don't want to hear anything more about it!"

"But you *shall* listen! It is true that your husband and I loved each other, but it was long before he had any thoughts of making you his wife, and when I (to my shame be it spoken) was a married woman. You are old enough (with all your innocence) to understand that there could but be two endings to such a guilty love as that, either separation or disgrace, and we chose the former. We chose to separate, and see no more of one another; and then Auberon met you, and took you to his arms to be, as I sincerely hoped, his comfort for the loss of me. Since then, your husband has been my friend—nothing more—and not so much my friend as you have been. This is the entire truth."

"He called you 'dearest,'" mutters Mrs Slade.

Her nature is not sufficiently generous to appreciate the nobility of the confession that has been made to her, and she finds it difficult to believe there is not more behind.

"Did he?" returns Gwendoline, mournfully; "it is more than I have ever called him since those days. I have not even spoken his Christian name. Don't you believe me, Lottie?"

"I don't know what to believe," grumbles the other. "In love with a married man! It's so wicked—so unnatural—so disgraceful!"

"I allow it is disgraceful—so are all our sins."

"And then to come here and shake hands with me, and call me your friend! I should like to know what my mamma will say when she hears of it."

"Lottie!" in a voice of determination, "don't you *dare* to speak to me in that tone again! I have been very weak, I know that well enough; but I have done nothing that should prevent your giving me your hand, or I never would have taken it. I am ready to acknowledge all my faults, but there is a vast difference between humility and obsequiousness, and no woman shall ever repeat the expressions you have presumed to use respecting me."

At this address, all Mrs Auberon Slade's bravado gives way, and she grows red, and stops her ears, and howls pathetically.

"Go away! go away! I don't want to hear what you say. I never wish to see you again. You are a very wicked woman; and so is Auberon,—and I am sure my mamma will say so.

Oh !—oh !—oh !" and the remainder of her tirade is lost in an effusion of childish sobs.

"I *am* going away," replies Lady Gwynne, quietly, as she compassionately regards the weeping girl. "Going away, not only from Fernside, Lottie, but from Warmouth altogether. And perhaps, when there are miles of distance between us, and you have leisure to consider calmly what has passed, you will not think me so wicked as you do now. It was a mistake on my part to imagine that an intimacy between you and me could ever come to good, but I encouraged it for the best. Will you not say that you forgive me before we part ?"

Mrs Slade has ceased sobbing ; she hears every word that issues from her adversary's mouth as plainly as though it were shouted in her ear, but no answer comes to Lady Gwynne's appeal.

"Only one word, Lottie ! Only say that you do not believe I courted your friendship in order to enjoy that of your husband more securely. Acknowledge so much ; you know it is the truth."

Still there is no reply. Lady Gwynne waits for it a few seconds, and then even more sorrowfully proceeds :

"If you cannot believe me blameless, if my affection for and my interest in you pass for nothing in your eyes, still say that you forgive. The offence, though bitter, has been unintentional ; let the pardon be full and free. I shall require something to carry away with me as comfort when I leave Warmouth and your presence for ever."

But it is evident that the comfort is not to come from Mrs Auberon Slade, who remains in her former position and makes no sign.

"O Lottie ! I could not have believed it. May God forgive you !" exclaims Gwendoline Gwynne, as she rushes from the apartment.

Her little carriage is waiting at the door, and in another moment she has leapt into it, and seized the reins, and urged the astonished pony to its utmost speed. She wants to be gone, at once and for ever ; to leave Fernside and its unpleasant memories far behind ; to wipe out the impression, if she can, of Lottie's insults and bitter incredulity. She thinks of all she has done for this girl ; of the many weary hours she has spent in her society, the peace and quietness which for

her sake she has resigned, the trouble with which she has attempted the improvement of her natural powers; and then reflects on her ingratitude, the vain appeals to her affection, her low taunts and base insinuations. Is it possible she can have brought this upon her own head—and for what? the desire to amend the self-imposed condition of one who has had no hesitation in rendering all her labour void, by an avowal of their mutual weakness, and to avenge his own thwarted inclinations, by dragging her name (which of all others he should have held sacred) down into the dirt. The thought is too bitter, too painfully oppressive, to be sustained with equanimity, and as it bears with its full force upon her mind, she draws rein, and suddenly alighting from the pony-carriage, desires her groom to take it back to the Orchard House, and inform Miss Ward that she shall return home on foot. And, as soon as the man is out of sight, dashes down impetuously to the sea-shore, where she may be alone, to look her sad future in the face, and decide upon its actions. For the shore of Warmouth is not like the crowded beach of a fashionable watering-place, but a long, narrow, unfrequented strand, backed by dark rugged cliffs, that overshelve and keep it private. And there is something in the hoarse voices of the waves as they break over the rocky shingles that Lady Gwynne feels will be consonant with the melancholy music in her own breast. For there she can weep freely, without sense of loneliness or fear of supervision; and does so weep, as she falls upon its pebbly bosom, hot weary tears, that are shed for herself and him, and the ingratitude that has stung her to the quick. How long she lies there she can hardly tell, for she is too sad to mark the flight of time; but the voice that rouses her is one that might almost call her from the dead again.

"*Lady Gwynne!* here, and alone; what *is* the matter? I trust you are not ill."

As she hears Auberon Slade speak thus, in a tone of the tenderest solicitude, she rises quickly to her feet, and proudly sweeps her tears away, and regards him with a look of scorn.

"What *right* have you to intrude upon my hours of privacy?"

"No *right*," he answers, humbly, "I am far from claiming it; but this beach is free to all, and passing to my home, and seeing you lie here, I thought that as a friend"——

"A *friend!*" she interrupts, disdainfully; "a fine friend you have proved to me, who, not content with robbing me of all that made life valuable, my self-respect and credence in your worth, have added to the injury, as the basest coward that walks this earth would almost scorn to add, by publishing my weakness to the world."

"Of what do you accuse me?"

"Of adding the last drop to the bitter cup your inconstancy placed to my lips, and poisoning the peace of the unfortunate woman you have made your wife, by telling her of the attachment that I once believed in."

He steps backward with surprise.

"Who told you this?"

"She did. I have but just come from her."

"Then she told you false; for the history of that part of my life and yours is, as it ever will be, sacred to me. Do you *really* think so badly of me as to suppose it could be otherwise?" But the pathos of his lowered voice has no effect upon her.

"Then you have permitted her to gain the information by indirect means."

"She has accused me of loving you. I acknowledge so far, and I did not positively lie in answer. How could I?"

"You have, in fact, been so careless of my reputation and her happiness, as to allow suspicion to accumulate about us both."

"Your reputation, Lady Gwynne, has always been my chief solicitude; for her happiness I confess that I care *nothing*."

"Then you should be ashamed of yourself to say so."

"Should I?—Yet *my* happiness does not appear to be a subject of absorbing interest to others."

"You have, at all events, as much as you deserve."

"I knew that was your opinion, Lady Gwynne, by the little care you take to preserve it to me."

"*I*—what have I to do with your happiness, or any portion of it?"

"The only portion that I now possess lies in yourself, you know that well enough, and—yet—yet"——

"Yet,—what?"

"Yet," with sudden energy, "you will drive me mad by

letting that brute Calvert make love to you before my very eyes."

But this accusation, so unwarrantable, so unjustifiable, in every way, excites her indignation, instead of rousing her sympathy.

"And if so, by what authority do you find fault with my proceedings? Am I not free to be courted by and marry whom I will? What licence have I given you to question me on such a subject?"

"The licence of the confession of your love for me," he answers, boldly.

"The confession of my love? The licence which that gave you passed away with the occasion. How dare you, a married man, come and remind me of a weakness which has been washed out long ago by floods of penitential tears."

The allusion is too much for both of them, and for several minutes they are silent. And then she speaks again:

"Tell me, if in all the course of our unfortunate acquaintance, I tried by any meretricious means to excite your admiration. Did I ever put on a ribbon, or a flower, or a jewel, that was assumed for the especial end of rendering myself attractive in your eyes?"

"I never supposed you did."

"And when, without effort on your part or mine, our hearts seemed to be drawn together by some invisible power, and welded into one, was it your happiness, your good, your gratification, or my own, that I most thought of when a momentary weakness made me consent to mutual infamy, and a heaven-born strength enabled me—spite even of *your* protestations—to re-take my word!"

"I know you did it more for my sake than your own."

"And, since your marriage, which, in this hour (perhaps the last hour I shall ever spend with you), I have no hesitation in avowing, was the deepest grief you could have inflicted on me; have I gone back from my resolution to be your friend, and guard the secret which is my disgrace and yours? I have neither fallen sick, nor gone about my avocations weepingly, nor betrayed in any way that I am aware of the agony I have passed through."

"I know that you have borne up nobly," he answers, in a broken voice.

"I came down here on purpose that I might find rest, and quiet, and freedom, from the daily pain of seeing you, yet here you followed me, and brought your bride, to bid me hourly look upon her happiness, and remember what I had lost."

"Oh no! oh no, Gwendoline! for God's sake, think anything but that."

"Did I shrink from the task you set me? Have I not tried to gain her friendship? make her time pass pleasanter? and smooth the little irregularities of domestic life for both of you? And yet this—*this* is my reward! That you should lightly let her guess the bitter secret of my past, spoil all my good intentions by the knowledge that I have marred, instead of increasing, the peace of your fireside, and lower yourself still more in my estimation than your fickle conduct to myself had lowered it. Have I deserved no better at your hands than this. Is inconstancy, coldness, untruth, and bitter mockery, all the reward my patient, uncomplaining love must look for?"

She gazes at him, as in all the distressing scenes through which they have passed together she has never gazed before, and Auberon Slade shrinks abashed beneath the angry fire of her eyes.

"Gwendoline! I acknowledge all that you have advanced against me, except one thing. I have been mad, passionate, careless, *desperate*, if you will, but I have never been untrue to you, not even by a thought!"

"Not untrue to me, and yet you married?"

"Yes! to my misery; but if you only knew the history of that marriage"——

"You were your own master."

"I was *not* my own master. Rage, and disappointment, and passion, had the mastery over me, and I succumbed to them. Oh, if I had possessed but a tithe of your angelic patience, if I had only waited for a few short months"——

"Hush, hush! we must not speak of that now."

"There is no need. To our misery, we know it without recapitulation. But when I parted with you, Gwendoline, no thought of such a contingency ever crossed my mind. The future seemed as hopeless as the past, and my only remembrance was of the many tears that I had cost you. And yet I

felt my unsubdued passions raging in me like a sea that would not sleep, and I believed so entirely in their strength, and the strength of your devotion, that I felt if we ever met again, and read the agony of separation in each other's eyes, our downfall would be certain. And so, in my desire to save you, by placing an insuperable barrier between us, I weakly did (what I feel now to have been wickedly done), I married Charlotte Cameron."

"For *my* sake?" she cries, almost joyfully, so frail is human nature!

"Yes, for your sake (as I then supposed it), and my own, and made myself miserable for life!"

"O Auberon!" The tone thrills through him, for it is the first time she has called him by his name since the day they parted.

"You know it, Gwendoline! you must know it! How *can* I be happy, or ever hope to be so, with a woman who has not one idea in common with myself, who has not even the sense to perceive the fact."

"But, Auberon, she loves you, and that is everything."

"In this case it is—nothing!"

"Not if you resolve to make it otherwise. I do not say that Lottie is clever, or accomplished, or even sensible. It would be simple flattery. But she *is* affectionate, and your conduct lately has greatly wounded her. How could it be otherwise?"

"It is her own fault, she *would* marry me."

"No, Auberon, it is *your* fault, and yours alone. No honourable man ever yet reproached a woman for loving him too much. But there is time to redeem the past. Go home, resolving to be faithful, and kind, and patient with her henceforward, and Lottie will yet repay you for the sacrifice."

"I cannot pretend to love her, for I love no one but yourself! A woman will not be duped in that particular. You will see it is impossible!"

"*I* shall not see it, Auberon, for I am going away."

"Going away! Where to?"

"That I have not yet decided on, but wherever it is, you must not follow me. We have made a great mistake, you in coming here, and I in not leaving Warmouth when you came; but my eyes are open now, and I see clearer."

"O Gwendoline! you *must* not go! Your friendship is

my only solace, the one thing for me, that Fate has not yet laid her sacrilegious fingers on."

He turns towards her; he is bold enough to seize her hand; his eyes gaze into hers, glistening through their tears, the first tears she has ever seen upon the cheeks of Auberon Slade, and her own rush up to meet them.

"No, Auberon! not that, *for God's sake!*"

She looks away from him, and over the dark, sullen sea, and struggles with the woman's weakness that would clasp him to her breast; and stamps it down, and is herself again.

"Auberon, listen to me!"

"I *am* listening, heart and soul!"

"For the very reason that our company is so dear to one another, I *must go!* It is too dangerous a pleasure to be safe or right for us, and I shall leave Warmouth as soon as I possibly can, and never see the place again whilst you are here. But I shall quit it, Auberon, far happier than I entered it (though earthly hope is as distant from me now as it was then), for the idea that all that you had said to me at Felton was untrue—a disordered fancy of your mind, which vanished before the test of separation—has been my greatest trouble. But I shall never think of that again, and now, before we part in this world for ever, you must make a promise to me, and keep it faithfully."

"I will do anything at your bidding that lies in my power."

"Try, then, to make Lottie happier. It will be some time before she gets over the knowledge of your love for me; but if you are honest with her, and in your desire to make amends for the past, she will soon forgive you, for all her feelings are upon the surface."

"I can never be happy, whatever she may be."

"The best happiness this world affords us, is that which we derive from making the happiness of others. Ah, Auberon! who knows if even *you and I* would have been happy with each other long? We thought so much of this world's pleasures, and so little of the next."

"I should have been but too glad to risk it," he murmurs, sadly.

"Hush! Heaven has decided otherwise for us. Let us be content," and voluntarily she places the hand which she has withdrawn within his own again.

"Good-bye! God bless and keep you! but you must neither write nor strive to follow me," and with that she turns to leave him.

"Gwendoline! Gwendoline! one word! don't leave me thus—I cannot bear it!"

"*God bless you!*" she repeats solemnly, with uplifted eyes, that droop again to dwell for a moment tenderly upon his own, and they are the last words he hears her utter.

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She reaches the Orchard House in a state of such exhaustion as to alarm Miss Ward, who cannot imagine why Lady Gwynne should have been so imprudent as to attempt to climb on foot the steep hill that leads to her home, on the very first day of venturing out of doors; and yet, before they can persuade her to lie down to rest, she insists upon writing a letter of importance. The letter is addressed to Mr Laurence, to whose kind keeping she confides all that has passed: her hopes, her fears, her efforts for the improvement of another, and the failure by which they have been crowned. And then she tells him of her resolution to quit Warmouth, and at once.

"I shall let my house and go abroad. I do not stay, dear friend, to ask your advice in this matter, for I have obtained higher counsel: God and my conscience have decided for me."

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"Mamma, darling!" exclaims Daisy, "let me read to you to-night, you do look so tired, and then we will both go to bed." The weary spirit acquiesces willingly, and in another moment the child's clear voice is rising on the evening air. She has selected her own chapter, and for a short time her mother listens without hearing, so distracted are her wandering thoughts, until the following words recall them:—

"Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous; nevertheless, afterwards it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby."

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"O Daisy! Daisy! it is for His sake!"

"Mamma! mamma! what is this?" for Lady Gwynne has fallen on her knees beside the child's couch, and is sobbing hysterically on her outstretched arms.

"Overtired," decides Miss Ward, as she rushes to the aid of her employer, and carefully assists her in mounting to her bedroom. "I was sure, dear Lady Gwynne, that that walk would prove too much for you. You must remember that such a shock as you have received is not to be got over in a day."

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CHAPTER XXXVI.

TEN YEARS AFTER.

TEN years!—and, after all, what are they? Endless in prospect to the young, perhaps, but to the middle-aged a mere cycle of days, and weeks, and months—a breath of the eternity to which we hasten! And yet they are powerful for good or evil, life, and death, and change; and the only man who can look back upon the last ten years, and say with truth that he has gained by them, is the man whom every twelve hours plants one day nearer God and heaven! But if the unceasing course of time brings many troubles, it also dries up many a tear. Where is your despair, brave bridegroom, who leads this morning to the altar a second wife; where the heart-broken sighs, the quivering eyelids, the hopeless accents with which you committed your first treasure to the darkness of the tomb, and the marriage-bed of silence! Gone! forgotten! locked away with the crape band which has scarce had time to rust upon your hat, and the long face which lasted until another wooing had begun! Where is the dread, pale widow, with which you set out upon your second trial of life's journey, alone and unprotected, hearing a death sigh in each murmur of the wind, and reading kindred trouble on the brow of every one who jostled you upon the way? You step out bravely now, without aid from any quarter, and scarcely missing the help that heaven withdrew; and on your fresh and comely countenance, in which I see reflected the smiles of sons and daughters, I can recognise no sign of tears, nor even trace the channels where they ran! And where your grief, young mother, as you gazed passionately, for the last

time, upon the cold inanimate countenance of your first-born, and felt as though a part of your own soul were about to be torn from you, and hidden in the dust with him? You smile! your eyes turn from me to fall upon a group of rosy cherubs, clustering about your chair, or nestling in your bosom—and I am more than answered. Time has been potent to heal all these troubles. The passage of ten years has scattered wonders in its train!

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And therefore it would be folly to suppose that such an interval could pass over the head of my heroine, and the other characters of this unpretentious story, without effecting a great change, though not so vast a one as may, perhaps, on a first hearing, be imagined. The time that makes of children men and women, and turns the middle-aged into the old, deals far more lightly with us, as we pass through the prime of life; and the eyes that had seen Lady Gwynne look for the last time upon Warmouth, would not perceive any startling difference in her appearance as ten years later—a woman now of six and thirty—she sits in her private apartments in a hotel in Paris, quietly employed upon some feminine occupation. A trifle more fulness in the figure perhaps, which rather adds to, than deteriorates from, its former beauty; and a more settled gravity about the eyes and mouth, but the same faint roseleaf flush upon the delicate skin, the same sweet smile and look, the same bright hair, untouched by any envious streak of grey! She is alone, and she has been working; but at the moment when we first encounter her again, the muslin and embroidery are lying prone upon her lap, and she has laid back her head upon the cushions of the chair, and clasped her hands, and lost herself in thought. Of what? Of the bygone days in which she prayed and wept so much, and from which she emerged as from a furnace of affliction; of Felton—Warmouth—Auberon Slade's last words, or his wife's cold ingratitude. Hardly! Of what can we be dreaming? Remember! all that took place ten years ago. She is far likelier to be calculating how much more money Miss Marguerite Gwynne's costumes will swallow up before the season is concluded; or when the girl intends to return from her afternoon ride; or if she remembers that she was at a ball last night, and is engaged out again this evening! For

when Gwendoline Gwynne, discovering the error into which she had fallen, resolved on quitting England, it was with no half intention of working out her cure. She had made the mistake of supposing that where love and passion have once dwelt together, and been but partially uprooted, it is possible, with any hope of happiness, to substitute an honest friendship, and grievously disappointed by the result. But it had taught her, what she had often heard, but never seemed to grasp in its full sense before, that if that deadly cancer Sin is to be rendered harmless to the soul, it must be, not only cut out root and branch and cast away, but we must lose the remembrance of where it lies. It is not sufficient for the purposes of God that we should forsake sin only, we must teach ourselves to hate it; that that, which seemed at one time so beautiful to us, may become as a leprous body, loathsome and abhorrent. And so Lady Gwynne had resolved, with the help of Heaven, to teach herself, and been successful. She had come abroad with a very heavy heart, but a full determination not to nurse her sorrow; and taking up her first residence (for Daisy's sake) at one of the German watering places, had refused to adopt no means, by which she thought it likely she might chase away the recollection of her grief. For the first year she had had some trouble to suppress, without appearing cruel, the correspondence which Auberon Slade had forced upon her; but, by persevering in her gentle remonstrances, she had brought him round at last to regard matters in the same light that she did; and a complete silence has since been maintained between them. Of course, through indirect means, she has from time to time received intelligence of him, but she has never gone out of her way to seek it; and at the present moment is as ignorant of his whereabouts, as though she had never heard his name.

She knows that, shortly after she had quitted Warmouth, he also left the place, and took up his residence in London; that, thence he has launched sundry fragmentary compositions on the world, which have never surpassed mediocrity, and greatly disappointed those of his admirers who counted on him as a rising genius; that he has had several children born to him; and that a few months back his wife died, though from what cause no one has even taken the trouble to inform her.

Auberon Slade is free. Gwendoline Gwynne knows that much, but has not the least idea, in consequence, that they will ever meet again, or wish to do so—so deep is her conviction that beneath the weight of private and professional cares, her image must have been eradicated from his heart! Besides *now*—at six and thirty—it would be too preposterous!—and when a woman can think calmly to herself of love and marriage as "preposterous," it is a sure sign that she has had enough of both of them.

During the last few years, she has resided over so many parts of the Continent, that she is not quite sure whether she feels most German or most French, and Daisy appears to be familiar with every language under the sun.

Only once, during that period, has Gwendoline Gwynne re-visited England; and then she remained at Felton Hall all the time, on a visit to Sir Richard and his young wife and family, and took good care not to go near the metropolis, except to pass through it on her journeys to and fro.

And she thoroughly enjoys Continental life. Grief does not seem to carry its funereal solemnity here with half the weight it does in England; the air is less dense, the temperature more equable, even the food is lighter, and more easy of digestion. Yes, Lady Gwynne loves the Continent, and so does her daughter; they are talking of Italy for next year; they are perfectly happy here—they never intend to reside at home again.

There is a commotion on the landing just outside the room—the sound of a pleasant, girlish voice, chattering volubly and rather shrilly, in good French; and the mother's colour quickens, and her eyes turn expectantly towards the door, already moving on its hinges.

"Well, darling!" she exclaims, affectionately, as a figure clothed in a riding habit enters the room, "home at last?"

But can this be Daisy? Daisy who, when we parted from her, was lying on her back, unable to turn, or move without assistance? Let us remember—that was ten years ago! and this is indeed herself.

With a full, upright figure, made graceful by the natural buoyancy of nineteen; a bright, happy face, blue eyes, and golden hair, Marguerite Gwynne is a beautiful woman—which her mother never was.

Five or six years of patient, unremitting care, fulfilled the prophecy of Dr Aberystwith, and rewarded Lady Gwynne for all her trouble; for then it was, that Daisy stood upright and walked again, and from that moment rapidly gained health and strength—and is now upon the verge of womanhood, so quick in intellect, joyous of temperament, and taking in appearance, that her mother believes her to be simply irresistible! and dreading the hour when they shall be called upon to separate, sees a would-be robber in every man that talks or dances with her daughter, and has almost arrived at hating the whole sex, in dread of the parting which she fancies close at hand.

For Daisy is her one great joy and pride, and firmly believing there never existed a more lovely specimen of humanity than this creature of her own creating, Lady Gwynne is quick to take offence where she is slighted, and to honour those who pay her beauty fitting reverence. Not that Gwendoline thinks so much of outside merit, for never has she given her own features a passing thought, except to criticise them; but Daisy—Daisy has such blue, blue eyes, such golden tresses; so very fair a skin—so her doting mother argues—wondering the while, with simple wonder, born of love, how she has been fortunate enough to keep this darling by her for the space of nineteen years. And, though Miss Gwynne may not appear to all eyes just the same as she does to those of her adoring parent, she is certainly a very pretty girl, and a most favourable specimen of Saxon beauty.

"Where have you been, my child?" continues Lady Gwynne, as Marguerite stoops down to kiss her; "you are so much behind time; I felt quite anxious."

But as Lady Gwynne is always anxious when her child is out of sight, and her alarm is nothing new, Miss Daisy is unfilial enough to laugh at it.

"Only scampering about the Bois, you dear old thing!—You might have guessed that without my telling you. And I don't believe I am more than five minutes after my time. Old Duclos is too stingy about his horses for that. By the way, mother, do we dine at the De Frelius to-night, or here?"

"Just as you like, darling! Do you feel at all tired?"

"Not a bit!—but I was thinking how it would bother you to go, after sitting out that horrid ball last night, and with

the anticipation of another for this evening. Why can't I go to the Embassy with Madame De la Brissac? She has offered to chaperone me"——

"And deprive your poor old mother of the pleasure of seeing you enjoy yourself, Daisy?" replies Lady Gwynne, reproachfully.

"Oh no, darling!—you know I wouldn't—only I am so afraid of your knocking yourself up. And it must be so stupid for you, since you never dance. Why don't you dance, mother? Monsieur Martignon would not believe yesterday that we were mother and daughter; he said it was impossible, and that we looked just like two sisters."

Gwendoline smiles.

"That's an old compliment, Daisy; I think I've heard it before."

"But you do look very young, mamma!"

"That is no reason I should dance, my dear! I shall never do that again, you may depend upon it. Had you not better change your habit, you look so warm?"

Upon which Miss Gwynne walks slowly and thoughtfully out of the room, but has hardly reached the landing before, with a sudden rush, she has returned again.

"I *knew* I had something to tell you, mother; Auberon Slade is in the Hôtel."

"*What*—my child?"

"Auberon Slade!—the man we used to know at Warmouth, don't you remember? At least, I suppose it is the same. I saw there had been a new arrival, on coming in just now, and so I asked François for the visitors' book—and there it was,—'Mr Auberon Slade and family, from London,'—I never asked if they were going to stay here—shall I?"

"No—no! dear, certainly not. We are sure to hear in time! I wonder what can bring him to Paris?"

"Pleasure, I suppose! Didn't his wife die last spring!"

"Yes."

"I thought I had heard so! Well, you wouldn't refuse the poor man an outing after that, would you? I dare say he hasn't had a real holiday since his wedding-day. She was a wretch, if I remember rightly. I couldn't bear her!"

"O Daisy! Daisy! she is dead!"

"Well, mother! I never could understand why people, who

have been odious all their lives, should become saints directly they die! Surely it is better to abuse them when they can't hear you than when they can!"

"It is better never to abuse them at all, my child."

"I am afraid I haven't arrived at that pitch of sanctity yet! Well! I hope this stranger will prove to be *our* Auberon Slade, for he was a jolly fellow; and I used to flirt tremendously with him down at Warmouth—used I not, mother?"

The laugh with which Lady Gwynne acquiesces in this fact is a little forced and nervous; but her daughter is too pre-occupied to observe it, and quits the apartment singing Gounod's "Marguerite," in a strong, clear voice, that can be heard to the very top of the flight of stairs that leads to their bed-chambers.

Whilst her mother, reassuming the attitude in which Daisy found her, attempts to realise the news she has just heard.

Auberon Slade in Paris! close at hand—under the same roof! Can it be possible? And yet, after all, what circumstance more likely to occur? The wonder is, that throughout this lapse of time they have never met before.

And yet Lady Gwynne's heart beats very little faster for the thought that before long they may stand face to face. Curiosity is there, busy at work to learn how he has passed the intervening years, and if they have dealt gently by him, and with what feelings he will take her hand again; a subdued pleasure, too, to think that now, perhaps, they may really prove true friends to one another, and derive great contentment from their social intercourse; but nothing more than this! The heart-burnings and throbbings, and aching, restless pains, have been trampled under foot with the fierce passions that gave them birth, or kindly put to sleep by the sedatives of Absence, Time, and Silence; and though the name of Auberon Slade stirs up old memories, and makes her restless and uneasy, it is more the uncertainty respecting the feelings with which he will regard the past that disturbs her, than any fears for her own peace in the present.

What ought she to do regarding him—how act? That is the question which is puzzling her. Under ordinary circumstances, she should immediately have written to so old a friend, apprised him of her vicinity, and begged him to come and see her; but she shrinks from putting herself forward for the notice of Auberon Slade.

How can she tell if he desires to meet her again—if he would even have chosen that hotel had he known she was an inmate there? And then to be repulsed, to have her hospitable offers met with cold politeness, or unresponded to—and at *his* hands! Oh, she could not bear it! She must leave it all to chance. He is sure in time to hear her name or her daughter's, and then may act as he thinks fit concerning them!

Chance is nearer at hand, however, than Lady Gwynne supposes it to be, for even whilst she ponders over this, Daisy's step, not unaccompanied, resounds upon the stairs; and Daisy's voice is heard in active colloquy at the half-opened door.

"Come in! of course, come in! She will be charmed to see you! Mamma! here's Auberon Slade. I met him on the stairs, and 'spotted' him at once. It's the most extraordinary thing in the world; if you had asked me just now to describe one of his features to you, I couldn't have done it for my life—and yet, directly I saw him, I recognised him—now didn't I?" (turning to her companion) "and said immediately, 'I know you're Auberon Slade,' and he was *so* surprised—weren't you? Now, mamma, am I not very clever, and aren't you delighted? Do say something, please, for the credit of the family, for you're looking just exactly as if you'd never seen him before." Then, with a comical look of consternation, "I hope to goodness I haven't brought in the wrong man!"

"Oh no, no! Daisy! My child, how wild you are!" replies Lady Gwynne, as she comes forward with both hands outstretched, and takes those of the new comer in a firm, friendly grasp.

Her heart did give one tremendous leap as the familiar face and figure came so suddenly before her, but the next moment it is quiet, for she marks a great change in Auberon Slade, traces the lines of care and suffering in his sharpened features, and her own feelings are absorbed in a desire to express her sympathy and interest in his.

"I am very glad to meet you again! It is but a moment since that I heard of your arrival."

He appears far more agitated by the renewal of old memories than she is. He has not found the same charm to lay them.

"You are very good. I knew you were staying here—but I hardly expected——How shall I apologise, Lady Gwynne, for this very abrupt intrusion on your privacy?"

"By making none! Were any needed, it would be the fault of this mad girl of mine."

"*Mad*, mamma! I do beg you will not take away my character in this reckless manner. That's all the thanks I am to receive I suppose, for saving you the trouble of dodging this gentleman round the hotel for a month before you caught him. You know you wanted to see him; and because I happen to display a little more presence of mind than the generality of my sex, I am to be publicly apologised for. There's gratitude! However, I'm used to it!" and Miss Daisy pretends to flout in an injured manner about the room, whilst Mr Slade's eyes follow her with evident admiration.

"You would not have known *her* again," says Lady Gwynne in a gratified tone.

"No! not if I had met her in the street; but as soon as I heard her name the features became familiar to me. She is just like what I always imagined she would grow up to be."

"That is, you guessed I was Marguerite Gwynne directly I told you so. What a gift the faculty of perception is! Mother! I've got an idea, we'll put off that dinner with the De Frelius to-night, and Auberon shall dine with us up here. We shall be such a charming little party!"

"If Mr Slade would like it, Daisy."

"You're never going to call him 'Mr Slade,' mamma, are you? I'm sure we always called him 'Auberon' down at Warmouth."

"You may have done so, my dear."

"Well! then I shall do so still. I cannot see why friends should drop all their good old customs just because they have not met for a few years. It's so cold, and disagreeable, and English. And I remember him *so* well. Do you remember my cats, Auberon?"

"Perfectly—and how you used to throw the wretched creatures on my back—directly I turned it to you."

"Ah, that must have been to teach you manners. What a deal you owe to me! By the way, you have about a hundred children of your own now, haven't you?"

"I have two," he answers, with a smile.

"Only two? Good gracious! I thought there were at least a dozen. And are they here?"

"Yes; located somewhere at the top of this big building with their nurse."

"Poor little dears! I must go and find them. How lonely they will feel. Are they boys or girls?"

"Boys."

"Oh, I'm glad of that! I like boys so much better than girls. Mother's always sighing over my iniquity in not being a boy. As if I could help it! Are your boys big?"

"Not big enough for you, I fear, Miss Gwynne. They are six and eight years old. I lost my first child and my last," he adds, by way of explanation to Lady Gwynne; "and these two are, I fear, very delicate, and need great care."

"The change will benefit them," she replies, consolingly.

"Oh! *I* will undertake to make them all right," cries Daisy. "We shall be having such famous romps together before the week is out. Now, I'm going to find them; and write an excuse to the De Frelius, and tell François we dine at home to-night. So good-bye for the present," and with a nod she is gone.

Lady Gwynne's eyes follow her with such lingering affection that she does not observe that Auberon Slade's are fixed upon her own face.

"Is she not lovely?" she demands presently.

"Very beautiful," is the hearty reply. "I do not know when I have seen a face that struck me more. Such life, and colouring, and intelligence, combined with handsome features! You must be very proud of her."

"Too proud, I am afraid, sometimes. Do you know," with a laugh and a slight blush, "that she is considered so much like your old flame, Lady Mary St Maur (the Duchess of Rocktown, as she is now), who was in Paris all last season?"

"Is she? I never thought Lady Mary St Maur half so pretty. And Miss Gwynne possesses a superior charm to me in the resemblance which she bears to her mother."

"To *me*, Mr Slade? I never heard that before."

"Chiefly in her expression, I allow! But once or twice she has already powerfully reminded me of yourself—as I can remember you during the first days we spent together at Felton."

He is looking straight at her as he says this; and she cannot

choose but colour, though she will not allow that the remembrance affects her.

"Have you seen anything of my old friends, the Calverts?" she asks abruptly.

"During the last year, I am glad to say, I have. Calvert and I did not speak for some time after meeting at Warmouth; but we ran against each other at the Club one day, and—he appears to be an excellent fellow after all,—and"——

"Oh! he is—he always was; and Emily Musgrave makes him so happy. Have they nice children?"

"Very nice, I believe, as far as children go—but I don't call myself a judge. There seemed to be an indefinite quantity of them, and they all looked fat and rosy. I wish mine were the same," with a sigh.

"I am sorry to hear your little boys are not strong."

"They were born strong enough, but they have been so mismanaged."

"But that is an error capable of remedy. You must look out now for some one experienced in children to take the charge of them. Have you a good nurse?"

"I believe so; but what servant can look after children like a mother?"

"Well, you will give them a mother again some day," she answers cheerfully.

"Oh! I hope so—I suppose so. I fully intend to marry again, that is if I can get any one to take me. But I am growing an old man now, Lady Gwynne."

"What nonsense! When you have not a grey hair in your head."

"Have I not? Look here," and lifting up the fair hair from his forehead, he shows her how it has turned white underneath. "And my only wonder is, that my head is not frosted all over. I have passed through sufficient since we parted to make it so."

"You *are* changed," she answers, softly.

And indeed there is a careworn, delicate, ethereal look about Auberon Slade as he now stands before her, which touches her heart very nearly; remembering what he was.

"I am not only aged, but poverty stricken," he resumes, with an attempt at gaiety. "I have scarcely any money left."

"But how is that? Have you been extravagant?"

"Not more so, I think, than other men upon my income; I possessed two thousand a-year. But living in London is naturally expensive, and then my poor wife was no manager, as you know" (with another deep sigh), "and, after the children came, she lost her health, and everything went to smash, and reduced our means one half. If you knew all that I have endured during the last ten years, Lady Gwynne, you would pity me."

"Let us hope for brighter days," she replies, cheerfully. "You have a long future still before you."

"If I don't make better use of it than I have of the past, it will be of little advantage to me. I have done nothing—literally *nothing*—since we parted. Do you remember our dreams of Fame in the old days? and of a name to be built up and handed down to posterity. My poor boys. Had they no worthier heritage in prospect than what their father's brain may leave them, they would be paupers indeed.

"Here *are* the children," exclaims Lady Gwynne, thankful for the interruption, as Daisy re-enters the apartment, with a pale-faced child in either hand. "Well, my dears, are you very tired? Won't you come and speak to me?"

She draws them to her, and presses a kiss upon either little cheek, and feels her own lip tremble as she does so. For both boys' faces are strikingly like that of their father, and the look most unaccountably thrills through her heart.

"This is Auberon, mother," explains Daisy, pushing forward the elder child, "and this is Walter. Auberon is to be your child, and Walter is to be mine. We've settled that already. Fancy, their being eight and six years old—I should have guessed them about two. And they can't read or write. Shocking little dunces! But I'm going to teach *my* child, and I bet he beats yours in a month. What will you pay me to be their daily governess, Auberon?"

"Anything you choose to ask," he replies, quickly.

"Oh! come! that's liberal, but rather rash, for I might demand the whole of your income; not being cognisant of its amount."

"Even so—I think you would be welcome."

"Just hear him talk, mamma! Is it you that have been putting him up to pay all these compliments during my absence? But now, are they not nice little boys? I'm in

love with both of them already. And they 're coming out in the Bois with me and their nurse to-morrow morning, and we 're going to "——

"Ride donkeys," interposes the elder child, fixing a pair of glistening eyes upon his father.

"And drink new milk," adds the little one.

"And fly pink balloons, papa."

"And see dogs and monkeys dance."

They are both standing at his knee now, eagerly peering up into his face, but Walter will not let go of Daisy's hand.

"What a kind friend you have found," says Auberon Slade. "I hope you have thanked Miss Gwynne for her good intentions."

"She 's not Miss Gwynne, papa—she 's Daisy."

"That 's right, Auberon," cries Marguerite; "teach papa his duty."

"And I love her," interposes little Walter, "because she is so pretty!" and then, climbing up upon her lap, he adds, sentimentally, "I *wish* that you was my mamma, Daisy."

Auberon Slade the elder smiles and colours, so does Lady Gwynne, but Daisy bursts into a laugh.

"Your *mamma!* you little rogue! That *would* be delightful—for every one but *me*, I expect. Fancy walking into possession of a family ready-made—I don't think that 's *my* style, mother, do you? So Auberon can set his mind quite at ease concerning my having any sinister intentions respecting him! And now, my monkeys—you must come back to your tea. I promised the nurse not to be gone five minutes, and it 's more than ten. Come quickly, or we shall all get into the most horrible disgrace?" and she leaves the apartment as she entered it, with the children clinging to her skirts.

Auberon Slade takes the opportunity to rise also.

"I won't intrude upon you any longer, Lady Gwynne!"

"But you will dine with us this evening, at eight."

"With the greatest pleasure." And the next moment he has sprung after Daisy, and Lady Gwynne hears their voices commingling with the children's merry tones as all mount the staircase together; and hearing—slightly sighs.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

WAIT.

The dinner is a great success. Daisy, arrayed in the dress in which she is to appear at the Embassy Ball that night, looks radiantly beautiful, and Lady Gwynne cannot help observing that whether she speaks or sits in silence (an alternative the young lady seldom resorts to) Auburn Slade's eyes are fixed in speechless, but unmistakable admiration upon her face.

She does not observe, however (what, had she been less ready to deny the possibility of his retaining an interest in herself, she might as easily have taken notice of) that his glance falls just as often on her figure, as robed in an old-fashioned costume of black velvet and point lace, she sits opposite to him at the dinner-table, only that it is nervously withdrawn before her own has even time to follow and detect it. And there are but few men in the world, who on this, as upon all occasions, would not prefer the appearance of the mother to the daughter, young, fresh, and blooming as Marguerite Gwynne may be.

For though the one face is all innocence, vivacity, and feeling, the other is impressed with the better and more enduring signs of a content that has surmounted sorrow, and a purity that has outlived the fires of a forbidden passion; the child's spirit is hopeful, but untried; the woman's has been weighed in the balance and found, not wanting!

The evening passes most agreeably—they laugh—they talk—they argue—they discuss the topics of Paris and the world at large, and no attempt is made on either side to rake up the ashes of the unhappy past.

Auberon Slade is bright, witty, and vivacious, as in the first days of their acquaintance; and Lady Gwynne's last impression that night, as she drives off with Daisy to the Ambassador's Ball, is of the earnest look, half soft—half eager—with which he leant upon the window of their carriage and bade them both good night. And the remembrance, drawing her back as it necessarily must do, to the days when

that look was all in all to her, lulls her senses into a kind of dreamy retrospection of her youth, from which she is aroused by the decided opinion which Miss Gwynne passes on their late companion.

"An awfully jolly fellow, mother, and very clever—but much too sarcastic. Did you hear how he cut up poor dear old Calvert's way of talking? He's got funny eyes too: hasn't he? Rather nice at times, but small! I like big eyes, like Monsieur Martignon's. And Auberon's nose is too peaky! You don't call him handsome—do you, mother?"

"Oh no! Daisy!" cries Lady Gwynne, with unnecessary haste and fervour.

"I thought not—however, he'll make a most delightful chaperone for me, and I may go anywhere with him (mayn't I?) because he's so old. He is going to ride with me to-morrow morning in the Bois."

"Why, I thought you had promised to take the children in the Bois, Daisy?"

"No! Did I? not to-morrow morning? I half believe I did, though! Never mind; they must wait till another day—because I am sure Auberon would be so dreadfully disappointed if I were to fail him. He is so pleased at falling in with us again, mamma, you can't think! He told me just now this had been one of the happiest days of his life! I don't know whether he meant it for anything in particular—but I'm sure I hope not!"

"Why so, my darling?"

"O mother! how *can* you ask? from a man three times my age! Why, if I thought it *were!*" —— with terrible emphasis.

"What would you do?" demands Lady Gwynne, unable to help smiling at the girl's earnestness.

"I'd—I'd—I believe I'd box his ears, mother."

"O Daisy!" is the horrified rejoinder, and then they are at the doors of the Embassy, and the confidence is over.

But, from that time, Auberon Slade is their daily companion, and he and his children, without any effort on Lady Gwynne's part, appear to become one family with her own.

He rides with Daisy in the Bois, joins her on the Boulevards, brings her stalls for the opera and boxes for the theatre; and though her mother is of course present on almost all these

occasions, she cannot fail to see (or thinks she sees) that his attentions are paid solely with a view to gain her daughter's heart—and Daisy is so arch and lovely, and engaging (so the mother with a suspicious swelling in her own throat decides) that it would be impossible—simply impossible! that any man could see and associate with and not desire to possess her.

The children fall to *her* share; a most unpleasant share (as people in general would consider it), for they are always lolling over her chair, or sitting at her feet, or clambering upon her knees. But Gwendoline Gwynne bears the annoyance sweetly (as she has borne so much already for *his* sake), even appears to like it, or one would suppose so to see her fondle and caress them when she thinks that she is unobserved. The boys like Daisy; they will romp and tumble with her, and pull down her hair, and steal her *bonbons* (generally presents from their father), but it is Lady Gwynne for whom they call the first thing in the morning, and the last thing at night; and whom they tell confidently that they will "never, *never* leave in all their lives again."

And Auberon Slade, quick as he mostly is to condemn the practice of parents palming off the company of their offspring upon strangers, seems curiously indifferent in this particular with regard to the probable inconvenience of poor Lady Gwynne; for though he constantly rebukes his boys for being rough or tiresome with Marguerite, he smiles complacently whilst they inflict their sticky kisses on her mother, or refuse to go to bed, unless she also mounts the long, weary flight of stairs that leads to their apartments.

Well—well! if it gratifies him and her—by far the two dearest creatures in the world to Gwendoline Gwynne—*she* will never be heard to complain of either the inconvenience or the apparent slight that permits her to endure it. Only, sometimes, after having listened to the children's evening prayers—prayers which she herself has taught them—and tucked them up in bed, and been nearly squeezed to death by the vehemence of their last embraces—Lady Gwynne creeps down again, not to the *salon* where *they* are sitting side by side in the moonlit verandah, but to her own room, and there, hiding her face in her hands, shuts out every consideration but one—and tries to decide whether it will be for Daisy's

happiness to become the wife of Auberon Slade. For matters have arrived at such a pass, that she can shut her eyes no longer to the fact that she *must* try and make up her mind to resign this cherished child into the arms she once believed would enfold no woman but herself.

All that Auberon Slade has said to her lately only seems to add to her conviction of the truth; he appears so evidently to be attempting to sound the feelings with which she will receive such a proposal on his part.

"I *must* marry again," he says, decisively, as they sit together talking in the twilight, "if I am ever to make any name for myself in the world of literature. This kind of pleasant vagabondising is all very well for a time, but it is fatal to steady composition. It is useless, concealing from you, Lady Gwynne, that I was very unfortunate in my first venture. My children were neglected, my home mismanaged, and my life unhappy! I think that under other circumstances, I *might*, perhaps, have done something; as it was, all heart forsook me, and I felt myself daily dragged down to the level of my surroundings."

"It *was* very unfortunate!" she answers, quietly; "but, perhaps, your impatience rendered it more so than it need have been. What are your ideas with respect to the *locale* of your future residence?"

"It is perfectly immaterial to me. Let it be France, Italy, or England—so long as I am left at liberty and peace."

"But surely you will not find that difficult to command. Get a governess for your boys—or send them to a good school—and you will be free at once?"

He makes a gesture of impatience.

"Ah! you don't understand me! It is not only freedom I desire—it is comfort!—I want some one who will manage all my household affairs for me, love my children and myself—and take the lesser burdens of life off my hands—so that I may devote myself to study."

"Then you must get a wife"—with a sigh.

"That's just it—but who would take me?"

"To talk like that is sheer nonsense! You have a good income and position, and are thirty-six years of age. You might marry—almost any one."

"But I don't want to marry *any one*, Lady Gwynne. There

lies the difficulty! I am very particular; and perhaps the person I want may think I am—I am"——

"What?"

"Oh! I don't know!" (nervously) "too old, too poor—too bad altogether to be counted worthy to obtain the blessing I desire."

"You have then—I am to understand, that you have, already fixed upon your second choice."

"I have!" decidedly.

"I wish you every success."

"I am sure you do! It is like yourself to say so, and mind you remember your words when I most need them! Dear Lady Gwynne! tell me seriously, do you think there is any chance that a woman, knowing me to be what I am, would be rash enough to trust her happiness to my hands!"

"It would so much depend on who she was."

"Ah! true"—turning away with a deep sigh—"I was a fool to put the question. An ordinary girl might see nothing in such an offer—but one—one—Never mind, dear friend! do not let us talk of the subject any more, or I shall get the blues. Where are we bound for this evening? To which theatre does Daisy give the preference?"

Always Daisy—Daisy—Daisy! Lady Gwynne can doubt no longer that Daisy's irresistible charms have dibbled a serious hole, even in the time-worn heart of Auberon Slade.

And the question which she asks her own heart is—*can* she, calmly—deliberately—contentedly—as a mother should—give up her daughter to *his* love and *his* embraces?

She is quite sure that she has ceased to entertain any feeling for Auberon Slade except that of friendship—yet the heart flutters very considerably before it can reply—and the tears rise thickly to her eyes, and her hands tremble (much in the way of old), and yet she answers "*yes*;" but with this reservation, "in His strength I can."

. . . . . .

But having formed this resolution, Lady Gwynne becomes unhappy to observe that Marguerite has no correspondent feeling for her admirer; and that though she accepts his presents, and his escort, and his compliments, she is just as free in passing her opinion upon all his actions as she was at first,

and has no hesitation in pointing out his failings to the notice either of himself or others. And though this is her character and conduct with respect to all her friends, her mother decides, and justly, that it is quite antagonistic to her receiving Auberon Slade as a lover, and, jealous for his honour and probable disappointment, she resolves at last to speak to Daisy, and sound her on a subject so materially important to her happiness and his.

"Going to ride with Mr Slade again to-morrow?" she exclaims, with well-affected surprise, as the girl communicates the intention to her; "why you never ride with any one but Mr Slade now; he seems to have frightened all your other cavaliers away."

Daisy shrugs her shoulders.

"So he may—and welcome! for aught I care about them. Commend me to a French partner in a ball-room, mother, and an English one on horseback. And Auberon *can* ride, if he can do nothing else."

"He would be amused to hear your scanty commendation, Daisy! But don't you think, my darling, that such constant attendance on his part may provoke people to talk! I am no prude, as you are well aware, but one cannot be too careful!"

"Talk of what, mother?"

"Of you both, dear, connect your names together! Mr Slade is a marrying man, as every one knows, and"——

But here the maternal harangue is interrupted by a loud laugh.

"Mother! *don't!* you 'll kill me."

"But why—Daisy! what have I said?"

"*Mr Slade a marrying man.* And if he is, do you think it *possible* any one would be such a fool as to connect his name with mine?"

"I think it very probable," says Lady Gwynne, warming up under the mocking laugh—"he is young—good-looking, and accomplished."

"*Young.* Why, mother, he 's nearly forty."

"Well, child! what of that? Men of seventy marry girls of your age sometimes."

"Ah! *sometimes*—but they don't marry me, and they never will. I wouldn't look at a man over five-and-twenty, and then he must stand at least six foot in his stockings!"

Her mother sighs. She is thinking of Auberon's coming disappointment.

"Do you really mean to tell me, then, that you have not observed Mr Slade's predilection for yourself, Daisy?"

"I know he likes me—every one does."

"But I mean more than 'liking' child! admiration."

"Of course he admires me—every one does that too."

"And suppose he loves you?"

"If he confines his love to making nice presents, and taking me wherever I want to go—I have not the slightest objection!"

"And asks you eventually to marry him?"

Daisy's heaven-blue eyes open to their widest.

"The man 's not mad, is he, mother? If so, you ought to have told me. I hope I haven't been showing myself in the Bois by the side of an escaped lunatic all this time. People *will* talk, with a vengeance, if that 's the case."

"Daisy, Daisy! you have no heart."

"Indeed I have, darling; it 's thumping and bumping about like fun at this very moment! But if you want me to give it to Auberon, I simply can't, and there 's an end of it. I 'd much sooner have one of the boys."

"You have always appeared to like him so."

"So I do like him, I 'd like to have him to live with us always, and give him a jolly good kiss every morning and evening. He 's got such a sweet mouth—I was very nearly kissing him to-day when he brought me the *bonbonière*. Have you ever observed his mouth, mother, with that sunny little moustache just dropping over it, for fear it should prove too tempting?"

"I cannot speak to you about such nonsense, Daisy. The matter is far too serious to be made a joke of."

The girl looks alarmed.

"I hope to goodness he hasn't said anything to you about it, mother."

"Not a word, dear; only I cannot help fancying"——

Daisy looks relieved.

"Oh, if it 's only your fancy, darling, take my word for it, it will never be realised. Auberon has too much sense to think of me. Besides, I 've told him over and over the kind of husband I want, and he has promised to look out for him for me."

"Then, could you *really* never think of Mr Slade, Daisy?"

"As a step-father, mother! Oh, willingly, if you'll begin to think of him too."

But the next moment the girl's countenance has fallen, and her face is hidden in her mother's bosom.

"Forgive me, dearest mother. I didn't mean to say that. It was horribly rude of me."

"It was thoughtless, darling; such things are beyond a jest. However, don't vex yourself about it, and *du reste*—we will not mention the subject again."

Still, although Gwendoline (believing a disappointment to be inevitable for him) does all she can to detach her daughter from the society of Auberon Slade, he seems to be always at her side or Daisy's, and each day brings nearer the communication, which he is evidently only waiting for a fitting opportunity to make.

At last it comes—

"Lady Gwynne!" (with all the nervous agitation of a person who is uncertain how the proposition he is about to make will be received) "may I ask for a few minutes' conversation with you?"

"Certainly!"—and equally nervous with her companion, Lady Gwynne resettles herself in her arm-chair. They are alone, and likely to remain so, for Daisy has gone to spend the afternoon with a friend.

"I have often spoken to you," commences Auberon Slade, looking anywhere but in her face, "of my intention to marry again, and you have been kind enough to say that it is not unreasonable. Still, perhaps, had you known that the person—that the only woman, that I would—that I could—in fact, perhaps I ought to have told you"——

"Mr Slade," she interrupts, pitying his confusion, and firmly believing that she knows the cause, "I think I can guess what you are going to tell me."

"You *ought* to be able to do so," he commences.

"And to save you from disappointment—or rather, from anything disagreeable, I think I ought to say at once—before you go further—that—that"——

His eyes are fixed now upon her face, and she breaks down before them.

"That there is no hope for me," he utters, hoarsely.

"I think—that is—I am afraid not," is the compassionate reply; and then he buries his face for a moment in his hands, whilst she looks down, like a pitying angel, upon his hidden grief.

Oh, it is hard!—doubly hard, remembering how, years ago, it was her fate to smite this heart—to be again the means of conveying to it a fiat of despair.

"My God!" breaks from him presently; but he says the words in a very low tone, and they are the only outward symptoms of his bitter disappointment.

"Auberon!" she ejaculates, after a pause. At her voice he lifts his eyes, and she is shocked to read the expression in them. "Oh, be comforted! try to bear it bravely! You don't know how hard it is for me to have to tell it to you."

"It ought to be so; it is not for the first time."

"I know it;" in a tone that slightly falters; "but don't blame her—it is my fault rather than hers. I thought I saw what was coming—but she is so young—so innocent—that"——

He has turned a face towards her that is full of keen surprise.

"Of whom are you speaking to me?"

"Of my child—my Marguerite! It was wrong of me, I say, knowing all her fascinating ways and manners, to throw you so much with her; but until lately, believe me, I did not suppose"——

"Gwendoline, you are altogether mistaken!"

It is her turn now to look astonished, both at his words and looks.

"What *do* you mean, then, Auberon?"

Her eyes gaze into his for a few seconds, almost affrightedly, and then, as their intention seems to burst upon her mind, she turns white as the lilies of June, and the quivering lids droop over them again.

"Gwendoline!" he exclaims, and as he speaks, seizes on her hand. "Do you pretend to tell me you do not know what I mean?—and that my lips have only been closed for this last weary month, because I could not dare believe, that after the consideration of ten years it was possible you could still care for such a worthless fellow as myself. But I *love* you, my own, my dearest, as I have never loved nor dreamed

of loving any woman but yourself! and I ask you, in the name of God, if you can conscientiously do so—to lay your hand in mine, and promise that you will give me an opportunity of striving to make up in some measure for all the misery I caused you?" She cannot speak, she cannot even see him, for her eyes are closed—but, blessed be heaven! she can hear, and one hand steals forth to clasp itself in his, whilst the other is laid upon his lowered head. "How could you believe that I had set my heart upon that saucy chit of yours? I admire her, for she is one of the most beautiful creatures I have ever seen; and I love her, because she is of you. But do you imagine that any girl in this wide world could make me forget what I owe to the woman, whose heart bled and suffered for me as yours has done? I have never known a day's happiness since we met or parted, Gwendoline! I have gone down—down—in the estimation of the world and myself, until I began to believe there was no lower depth for me to fall to. But through it all I have held to one trembling hope—that at some future day, whether in this world or the next, God would permit me once again the blessing of your love!"

"Wait," she whispers softly,

"'—— Wait!—My faith is large in time,
And that which shapes it to some perfect end.'"

"A perfect end, indeed," he answers, "if my ambitious hopes may but be realised. Oh, my beloved!—without you I have been nothing,—with you I feel I can do all things! If you will take me to your heart once more,—believe in me, and trust me as of old,—I shall rise upon the wings of my recovered faith till I reach the heights we dreamed of in our happy youth."

Ay, Auberon Slade! and higher still than these,—even to the summit of all things,—to Eternal Life itself.

"Gwendoline!—my love—my dearest. Look at me and say that it is true,—that you *do* love me still."

She looks at him,—she sees him kneeling close beside her, with his eyes (filled with as warm a fire as ever kindled there in the days of their first passion) fixed upon her; and, with a cry of joy and gratitude, and love commingled, opens her arms and clasps him to her faithful breast.

. . . . . .

"What *are* you two conspirators laying your heads together for?" exclaims Daisy, a couple of hours later, as, without any warning, she bursts impetuously into the room, and discovers Auberon Slade and her mother in close proximity. "Hatching some plot against me, I'll be bound; but I tell you, once for all, I won't have it, mamma! If you are so giddy, I shall not be able to leave you by yourself. I declare, I never turn my back for a minute but you get up to some mischief or other."

"O Daisy! darling!—don't be so wild," pleads Lady Gwynne, whose conscious face her daughter unmercifully scrutinises.

"Mamma, dear, you've got such a colour! I believe that you have been rouging—and so, I declare, has Auberon! Well, we *are* getting demoralised in Paris."

"Daisy, do be serious! I want to tell you something," says her mother, imploringly.

"Good heavens!—what can it be? Don't say that Amalie has sent me home the fern wreath instead of the acacia, for I won't wear it, and I told her so."

"It's nothing about Amalie, my dearest!"

"Then you are going to put off Blankenburgh this year, and go to those German baths again. It won't do, mother; I've set my heart on Blankenburgh."

"You shall go all round the world if you wish it, Daisy," replied her mother.

"Excuse me," interposes Auberon Slade; "but I hope you won't be rash about making promises of that sort, Lady Gwynne."

"And pray, what right have *you* to interfere, sir?" demands Marguerite, saucily.

"O Marguerite! be steady for a moment."

And Daisy sees the tears standing in her mother's eyes, and is sobered immediately.

"I want to speak to you, my darling, of something that concerns you and me—and all of us—very nearly. I don't know what you'll think of it, Daisy. I am afraid it will be rather unexpected news; but if the prospect should be displeasing to you, my own dear child—my sweet girl—why, I—I"——

"For God's sake, don't say you'll change your mind!" exclaims Auberon Slade, in a fright, at which she smiles.

"You have told her now, Auberon. Daisy must guess it all. My darling, we knew each other years and years ago—and—and—I hope—that is, I believe—it will be for your happiness as well as mine, and" ——

But here Lady Gwynne is interrupted by Daisy casting herself into her arms, and bursting into a flood of tears.

"My own mother! I *am* so glad. Oh! how I pray you may be as happy as you deserve to be."

And for a few minutes nothing is to be heard but the sound of her girlish sobs, and her mother's whispered blessings and caresses.

. . . . . .

"How charming it will be," cries Daisy, springing up and laughing, whilst the tears are still standing on her eyelashes, "to have him living with us, and to be able to tease him all day long. But I never—no! not if he lives to be a hundred and fifty years old—I never can call Auberon '*Papa!*'"

It is such an unexpected turn to the sentimentality of the occasion, that every one welcomes it with a laugh.

"I don't care what you call me, you saucy child," says Auberon Slade, as he bestows a paternal kiss on Daisy's blooming cheek. "Tom, Jack, or Jerry—it is all the same to me—so long as your mother calls me '*husband.*'"

And then, as his eyes turn to rest fondly on the face of Gwendoline Gwynne, and his hand seeks her own again, he murmurs, in a voice which is heard by one ear only :—

"Then draw me closer, closer to thee, dear,
Do what we will, thy fate and mine are fixed,
My life and thine, inevitably mixed,
We take our destiny and do not fear;

"Yes! all of self has sweetly died in me,
Thy noble heart is beating in my breast;
No one shall steal it now—there, let it rest;
And know, dear love, that I am lost in thee!"

THE END.

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